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OR,
The Muck-A-Mucks of Animas.

A Romance of the Silver Range.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "MONTE JIM," "OLD '49," "NOR-
WEST NICK," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DANGER AHEAD.

"TAKE a look, Patsy, and see what you make of it," hurriedly cried Dan Keithwood, turning his head to shoot the words through the cab window, then looking ahead to where a dull red glow lighted up the night.

"It's a fire, sure enough, but—"

"It's too big a show for a camp-fire, but the bridge might make it, Patsy," grimly said the veteran engineer, his fingers closing on the polished lever, though his gaze was still fixed ahead.

"It's not so high as that, I'm thinkin', Dan. It's showin' over the cut an' the curve that's deceivin' ye. Anyhow, we'll soon be knowin' the thruth, for—"

"ORDER YOUR DEVILS TO PUT OUT THOSE FIRES, FATHER! QUICK! HESITATE AND SEE YOUR CHILD FALL DEAD AT YOUR FEET!"

"Too mighty nigh for Lizzie and the kids, Patsy, and they'd heap rather I learned the truth in this world than the next."

Daniel Keithwood's face was grim and hard-set as he slowed the pace of his iron horse. There was no great haste. The fire was still a goodly distance ahead, for, if it had been this side of the cut, the flames must have become visible ere this. Indeed, it could only be at or near the bridge spanning Roaring Fork, since there alone in that rocky waste could fuel in abundance be found, and this red beacon was far too large to come from burning ties, kindled by scattered coals from a passing freight train.

"If you get through, and I get my time, Patsy, tell Lizzie—"

What was the matter with him to-night? What put those words on his tongue, bringing a half-grin into the honest, freckled face of the fireman? Where was the nerve which had long since passed into a proverb along that section of the Denver & Rio Grande.

He hardly recognized the sound of his own voice, and he could not have explained why he uttered such words, had Patsy Brannigan asked him what he feared.

There was ample time in which to stop the train, even if he had kept up full speed until through the deep, curving cut ahead. At the very worst, it could only be the bridge burning, and that would simply mean a backward run to the station last passed, to wait until arrangements could be made for transferring his passengers. Then—

Thoughts such as these were flashing through his brain, while the train swept at lessening pace through the cut, and the bronzed face of the veteran was flushing with something like shame at his unusual timidity, when Patsy Brannigan yelled out sharply:

"The rid loight, Dan! Danger ahead, an—"

Keithwood caught sight of the same signal, and instinctively his trained hands applied the air-brakes.

Standing in the middle of the track was a man wildly swinging a blood-red lantern, making the signal to stop, at the same time shouting a sentence which was almost lost amid the harsh grating of whirring wheels.

With a shock that caused an ugly noise from end to end of the train, as the coaches bumped heavily together, the train came to a stop when barely a dozen feet from the man with the lantern. But close as this was, he kept his position, waving the danger signal, and shouting his hoarse warning of danger ahead.

"What is it?" yelled both the engineer and his fireman, as they leaned far through the cab windows.

"It's jest old business, ye want to mind, pardners!" came a harsh voice from behind, and they turned to face a brace of ugly revolvers in the hands of a burly, masked figure, who had sprung into the cab. "Kick an' croak! Simmer, an' live longer! Which hits ye hardest, mates?"

"The devil an' all—"

"Tramps or train-robbers?"

"The fool-killer of ye try any o' that!" viciously menaced the man in the mask, as he noticed their instinctive reaching for a weapon.

Even as he uttered the threat, a bullet came through the cab, sending a tiny spray of broken glass into the face of Dan Keithwood, and causing Patsy to crouch down with a muffled howl of disgust and terror.

"Get down to business there!" came a shrill, peculiar voice from the gloom beside the engine. "Pull out, and pull easy!"

With that shot for a signal, other shots rung out in rapid succession down the track along the coaches, as though the outlaws were fairly riddling the car windows. But the men in charge of the engine had no time to think of others.

Two revolvers covered them. At least one other masked figure was hastily coming over the coal-laden tender, pistol in hand. And another bit of lead came through the window, to give a vicious tug, as it made a passage for itself through the dense beard of the engineer.

"Your croakin' won't mend it any, pardner, so don't buck your own brains out. The boss says pull out easy, an' pull goes—eh?"

The masked man leaned a little forward with his cocked revolvers, and though there seemed to be a certain rough friendliness in his tones, neither Keithwood nor Brannigan could for a moment doubt his perfect readiness to shoot in case orders or resistance should come.

"Think o' Lizzie an' the kids, Dan!" uttered the fireman, fearful lest the man who had, in his younger days, won the title of "Devil Dan" by his reckless daring and utter lack of fear, should rebel against such insolent ordering.

"Shoot the fools and run the engine yourself, man!" came that peculiar voice from the gloom alongside the iron way; but, even as the impatient order came, Dan Keithwood grasped the lever and sent his machine ahead at a slow pace.

As he did this, he knew that the train had been cut, leaving at least half its length behind. A fresh fear assailed him and he said:

"There's a freight following us. For love of God don't let it run into the coaches back there!"

"Stick to your knittin', pardner, an' don't fret 'bout what goes on ahind the back o' ye!" grimly nodded the outlaw, flashing a glance out of the cab as the engine increased its pace. "We ain't payin' you wages fer to—put on the cairb, critter!"

The red light cut a circle close beside the track, conveying a meaning which the masked rascal readily interpreted. And at the same moment the outlaw who had shown himself on top of the tender, hastily scrambled back the way he had come, dropping down to cut off the Mail and Express car as the engine came to a pause.

"Let her crawl on a bit, pardner," nodded the masked rough as a shout came from his assistant behind. "Net too mighty fast, mind ye, an' don't let the pizen critter bolt with ye, nuther, unless you're in a mighty hurry fer to take a leap clean through all eternity!"

"The bridge is down?" ventured Keithwood, strangely meek for one with his well-deserved reputation.

There was no reply to this query. The mask was looking out of the cab as though anticipating some fresh command, and for an instant the trainmen glanced at each other, but only to shake their heads as they caught the sound of exploding firearms coming from the direction of the abandoned train.

It would be worse than folly to attempt aught like that now. They might surprise this rascal and kill or hurl him off the engine. They might "get away" with his comrade, now showing his head over the back of the tender. They might open the throttle and send the iron horse ahead too fast for any of the evil gang who might try and check them.

But, what was ahead of them?

Patsy Brannigan stole a glance through his window, but before he could catch a glimpse of the bridge far ahead, the masked outlaw sharply cried:

"Stiddy, you! Play turtle with that cabeza!"

"Sure, I only wanted—"

"Shet clam!"

Patsy almost nipped his tongue off in his haste to obey, for that grim muzzle looked to his eyes far wider than the bore of the mightiest cannon ever cast.

Dan Keithwood stood with hand on the throttle, grim, silent, waiting for orders. A man of marble would have shown fully as much emotion.

Yet, before him were the faces of Lizzie and her children. In his swelling heart was the wonder if he would ever again see them in life.

The outlaw on the tender uttered a shout, and his mate in the cab gave a mighty sigh of relief as he said:

"Stop 'er, pardner! Shet her off, 'less ye want to jump—bully fer you!" with a harsh laugh as Keithwood brought his engine to a halt. "Blamed ef I didn't begin fer to think the boss had clean forgot all 'bout us pore devils at this eend o' the picnic!"

"What next?" coldly asked the engineer.

"Keep yer linen on, pardner. It's the boss what says, not me. An' ef you'll take a fri'nd's advice you'll jest let him do the sayin' 'thout axin' will he hurry up quicker. You'll live longer fer it!"

The locomotive had come to a halt fairly within the red glow of a huge bonfire blazing beside the track, and Keithwood frowned darkly as he divined the truth: it was the glow from this, not from the bridge in flames, which he had sighted from the side of the cut. If he had only known as much! If he had only pulled her wide open and dashed through the snare!

"Tumble 'em out o' there, my man!" cried that shrill voice, cutting short Keithwood's regrets. "And you, my fine fellows, come down with the curb on, or you'll get your time in a mighty hurry!"

Neither Keithwood nor Brannigan offered resistance. By the red glow they could see several rough clad figures, each one of whom bore a Winchester rifle and revolvers, and each one looking as though nothing would please them better than an excuse for burning powder.

"Hold them level, boys!" cried the chief as he sprung into the cab vacated by the crew. "Don't kill them unless they try to break away."

Dan Keithwood uttered a cry of angry horror as he saw the masked chief pull the lever over, letting on a full head of steam, the engine fairly leaping forward over the rails as the daring outlaw turned and leaped lightly to the ground.

"You devils!" he panted, struggling madly with the strong arms that wrapped about him as he tried to leap forward and regain his engine.

"It's murder—worse than murder! There'll be a collision and—"

"Would you like to be on her now, you poor fool?"

CHAPTER II.

THE MUCK-A-MUCKS OF ANIMAS.

THE daring outlaw alighted safely on his feet, gazing through the eyelets of his grotesque mask after the runaway engine, paying not the slightest heed to the half-crazed engineer as Keithwood struggled with his captors.

Almost immediately the engine seemed under full headway, but its mad, unguided flight was

brief indeed, for less than a furlong from the bonfire, the rails seemed to give way beneath the mighty mass on one side and the engine plunged endlong down the steep embankment, to fall in hissing ruins on the rocks below.

The chief train-robber turned to Dan Keithwood, with that coldly sneering question, but received no answer.

The engineer gave a long breath of relief, yet into his eyes came a sudden dimness as he gazed at that cloud of rising steam, for he had learned to love the mighty mechanism which had been so prompt to answer his slightest touch through all these years.

"Behold the reward of prompt obedience!" laughed the chief, as he turned his face away from the wreck, flashing a keen glance from face to face of his captives. "Some bull-headed idiots would have let her went, full split, and— you see? Gone to heaven or the other route, according to the tickets they carried!"

Keithwood and Brannigan interchanged swift glances as the sound of distant firearms came to their ears, but the chief laughed as he read their thoughts aright.

"It's my powder, boys, and only part of the circus, so don't waste thoughts on an insurrection of your own. I've a better use for you than shooting you down as rebels."

"You can't use us worse than you have already," muttered Keithwood, with a gloomy glance toward the wreck. "This'll be a costly bit of work for you in the end."

"A threat, dear boy?" softly asked the outlaw.

"The simple truth!" flashed Keithwood.

"Because I never let a man show his teeth twice. You'd ought to know that, Daniel Keithwood, unless you have ears only for train orders. You have a family, I believe?"

The engineer shivered perceptibly at this question, for he could not mistake its drift. He nodded assent, not daring to trust his tongue just then.

"I thought so. Just how long that family will continue to have a head, depends on your good sense, Daniel. Try to solve that enigma, please, until I need your services."

He uttered a few words in an undertone to the outlaw who had been the first to enter the cab, then strode rapidly away down the track.

"You're lucky, pardner," nodded the outlaw, his heavy hand resting on the engineer's shoulder. "Tain't every critter as comes off so cheap when he fetches that look into the eyes o' the High Muck-a-muck o' Animas! Nur you won't do it ag'in, ef you're durned fool 'nough fer to run the resk—that's what!"

Keithwood stared in grim silence after the shadowy figure of the chief, now beyond the circle of firelight. Patsy Brannigan gave a doleful sigh, standing a meek captive, for now his worst fears were realized.

This was no ordinary gang of train robbers, enlisted for a single exploit, to fade away into nothingness with the first sign of resistance; but a regularly organized band of law-defiers, whose career had already extended over years of time and countless leagues of country.

"The Muck-a-mucks of Animas!"

A whimsical title, brought down from the northern borders of California, adopted from the guttural Chinook, but there was deadly earnest underlying the burlesque name and burlesque masks.

Two of these were visible now by the red light of the fire; made of papier-mache, luridly painted, with features wildly exaggerated, but lending a grim humor to the scene which was scarcely less terrifying than if all trace of the fantastic was banished. Masks such as mischief-loving lads once delighted in wearing to frighten their little sisters!

Long before this eventful night Captain Junius, as the outlaw chief saw fit to be called, had learned the value of these masks, and not alone as perfect guards against after recognition. A laughing, jesting executioner is more terrible than one of grim, saturnine mien.

"Hevin' a gay ole circus, ain't they?" laughed the outlaw chief guarding Keithwood, as the irregular rattle of firearms came floating through the night from the rear section of the divided train. "But the boss said true when he claimed it all as his powder. They's heaps o' critters never travels 'thout totin' a gun or two, but they never thinks o' usin' 'em when trouble comes—like this!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Dan, as that heavy hand gave him a shove in the direction taken by the chief of the Muck-a-mucks.

"Goin' down yen' way to see the fun—why not?"

"I mean—is it anything more than a raid on the passengers?"

"Bet yer life!" with an emphatic nod. "Clean sweep, pardner. It's a sort o' way we hev, don't ye know? Clean sweep—an' mebbe you'll come in good play, too!"

Keithwood did not ask any further questions, for he feared the answer which might be given him.

"Reckon they've sent out a flag?" ventured Patsy, in a very uncertain tone of voice. "Thar's a freight comin', an' it'll be worse nor a circus!"

"Shet clam!" growled the Muck-a-muck, who had him in charge.

The train consisted of but two coaches for passengers, and a combined Mail and Express car, the division allotted to the Express also containing the baggage.

At the first halt, the passenger coaches had been cut off. At the second, the Mail and Express had been uncoupled from the tender, left standing alone on the track, at least a furlong from where the other cars stood.

It was about the passenger coaches that by far the greater number of shots were discharged, apparently with the purpose of holding the travelers in fear and subjection until all other arrangements were completed, but, as Keithwood and his fireman drew nearer the Mail and Express car, they distinguished a number of dark figures skulking near, evidently foiled for the moment by the closed and secured doors.

"Pick yer hoofs up faster, pard!" cried the masked outlaw, as a shrill whistle came floating to his ears. "That's the boss callin', and when he hes to wait, it makes him mighty bilious! I'd hate to look at ye when they wasn't any roof left on yer cabeza—'deed I would!"

To resist or hang back would be worse than folly, so a few moments carried the two captives close to the car, where the High Muck-a-muck, his shrill, peculiar voice slightly altered as he addressed Keithwood:

"Who's messenger on this run?"

"Tom Weeden. He's got mighty good backing, too, in the mail clerks," was the prompt reply, with just a tinge of exultation in his tones as he saw that as yet the car had not been entered by the robbers.

"Is he fool enough to buck against our crowd?"

"Shall I ask him?" with a grim smile, as he called aloud: "Tom!"

"That you, Dan?" came a clear, manly voice from the closed car.

"Worse luck—yes! But these gentlemen wants to know if you're fool enough to buck against their crowd?"

"If that crowd was an army—yes, all the same! Tell 'em so, with my compliments, will you?"

"Tell him that we are twenty-five in number, each man with from one to a dozen halters about his neck."

Keithwood literally obeyed, and Tom Weeden retorted:

"One 'll be enough, if you'll toss the loose end through my window. I don't mind your coming in that way, but any other—not to night!"

"Tell him that we are the Muck-a-mucks of Animas."

Keithwood obeyed, but there came only a defiant laugh in response. Tom Weeden was hardly a man to be frightened by empty sounds, and all who listened knew that he was determined to defend his charge with his life, if worst should come to worse.

For the first time the High Muck-a-muck showed signs of irritation, and without using Keithwood as an interpreter further, he cried out in vicious tones:

"I'm coming in, but I'll carry the rope in my hand, with the noose shaped for your neck, Tom Weeden! That, or—don't be an ass, Thomas," his voice undergoing a startling change. "Better men than your father's son have knelt to the inevitable. Better men than—"

A shot came from the car, and the High Muck-a-muck visibly flinched and ducked as his slouch hat dropped by his side, knocked from his head by that almost fatal bullet.

With marvelous swiftness his own revolver was pouring a stream of lead into the car, his men instinctively scattering and dodging in the gloom as they sought safer quarters.

No response came from the car, and the outlaw chief did not see fit to call his second pistol into play. Unless his first shot had proved fatal, he knew that Tom Weeden had retreated from the window in the door, to a safer position.

Swiftly as the Muck-a-mucks dodged, neither Keithwood nor Brannigan had a chance to run away, those in charge taking care to maintain their grips, using their prisoners to shield their own carcasses while beating a retreat.

"Looks a leetle low-down, but business is business, pard," grinned the burly rascal who held the engineer. "That durned fool'd just as soon hit a gent as not—dad-burn him!"

Before Keithwood could make any reply, even if he tried, the High Muck-a-muck came to his side, speaking harshly:

"It's your turn, my fine fellow! I want to get in, and you've got to open the way; you and your partner, here."

"The Lord save us!" gasped Patsy.

"All the better for you in that case," with a harsh, merciless laugh. "Where's the tools, lads?"

A couple of men advanced, bearing bright, heavy axes, one of which dropped at the feet of each prisoner.

"There's the keys; now open yonder door!" flashed the chief.

"You mean—"

"For you to take those axes and cut down yonder door," was the sharp interruption.

"You don't know Tom Weeden—he'd blow bloody murder clane through the both av us, sor!" gasped Patsy, his brogue growing in equal ratio with his excitement and his bodily fears.

"So much the worse for you. I can spare you two better than the poorest of my men. Will you do as I bid you?"

"Tom I'll shoot us if we try it," muttered Keithwood, huskily.

"And I'll kill you if you don't!"

"Let me say a word to him first, then?" pleaded the engineer, at once crying out clearly: "Tom, they're forcing us to chop down the door, though I've told 'em you'd shoot us if we tried it."

"I will, too, as Heaven hears me!" came the stern response. "I love you, Dan, like a brother, but duty comes first of all."

Keithwood turned to the chief, but saw no pity in those eyes.

CHAPTER III.

MAJOR MAGNET.

LET us enter the passenger car of that train, a short time previous to the hold up of the Muck-a-mucks.

"So what does he do but pull his gun and say—sweet as a pink, and twice as pretty, major!"

Red-faced, portly, good-humored Paul Oberlander laughed heartily at the widely opened eyes of his companion at this abrupt termination to his exciting reminiscence, and one of his well-cushioned elbows found its way to the ribs of the slowly flushing man as he added:

"Don't blame you a bit, major, and ought to thank you for cutting my dreary yarn short so politely. And yet," with just the suspicion of a sigh, "it was a royally good one, too, and I'd just got to the best part of it!"

That flush grew deeper and Major Magnet said:

"But I never said a word, Oberland."

"Yes you did—with your eyes. And they were talking volumes, though never a syllable turned to me. Shall I give you a knock-down?"

"You know the lady, then?" a glow leaping into his eyes.

"By name, only. You surely know her father: Keene Bryer, of Animas?"

There was no immediate answer to that last question, and once more those keen, steady, almost stern eyes rested upon the fair young face which seemed to have such a powerful attraction for the man of the world. And the jesting smile slowly faded out of the conductor's red face as he saw—what was it?

In almost any other man, he would have pronounced it love. In this man he was puzzled, for Major Magnet—"the Man of Nerve" as he was known throughout that section—was about the last being on the footstool to be suspected of falling in love at sight. And this young lady might easily have been his own daughter, so far as age was concerned.

The train was speeding swiftly along toward its destination, the oil lamps overhead casting a none too brilliant light over the passengers, showing the seats not more than one-half occupied. All without seemed black by contrast, and though the evening was still young, several of the travelers had curled up in their seats for a nap.

Of them all, not one held the faintest suspicion of what that dark night held in reserve.

Only a few miles back Major Magnet had abandoned the smoker for that car, and not until the portly conductor came to share his seat had he even noticed the young lady whose beautiful face brought such an unusual light into his cool gray eyes. In shifting his position to catch the smooth-flowing words of Oberland more easily, Major Magnet caught a pair of large, lustrous, dreamy eyes resting upon himself or his companion, and from that moment Paul Oberland talked to unheeding ears.

Eyes set in a face that was almost oriental in its rich brunette beauty, though the fatigue of travel had slightly dimmed the roses in peachy cheeks and brought a languid dreaminess into the orbs themselves.

A fashionable hat set upon her jetty hair. A fleecy veil helped hide her forehead and shadow her eyes. A daintily gloved hand rested against the closed window, her cheek supported by this, and only for the lamplight reflecting back from those large eyes, she might easily have been thought asleep.

Over her neat traveling suit she wore a linen duster, buttoned almost to the throat, but even that ugly invention could not wholly disguise her perfect figure.

A figure that was developed beyond her apparent age, yet with all in harmony, all symmetry and grace itself.

In the seat just back of her, sat a young man, with half-averted face gazing out into the night, his temple pressed against the glass, his eyes unwinking as though they possessed the power of overcoming the gloom and reading aright each dim phantom as the prospect seemed sweeping rapidly toward the rear.

His left hand touched the shoulder of the young

lady as it closed on the back of her seat, but she paid no attention to this familiarity, if, indeed, she was aware of it. That alone just then told of their acquaintance, and a less keen and comprehensive gaze than that of Major Magnet would hardly have noticed that much.

The ghost of a frown stole across his face, and something like a glint of anger came into his eyes as they passed from hand to face.

One that the large majority would have pronounced handsome; some even beautiful; all at least attractive; the face of a modernized Apollo, the perfect profile only broken by the heavy, drooping mustaches of yellow silk, such as no demi-god ever wore.

Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty years of age, Creed Ashmole had seen enough of life to lose all trace of juvenility, using the term in its crudest sense. There was nothing worn or jaded about him, yet he gave the impression of one far older than his actual years; a man of the world, in short.

"Keene Bryer?" echoed Major Magnet, his tones guarded so that by no chance could the young lady suspect her relations being discussed.

"Yes; the mine-owner, speculator, modern Midas, you know," nodded the conductor, forgetting his untold story in this new subject of mutual interest. "I thought you knew everybody!"

"I know him—by reputation. He's the owner of the now famous strike, the Golden Hope," nodded the major.

"Lucky—lucky no end!" sighed the fat conductor, with a guarded glance toward the young lady, whose eyes were now closed, as though in brief slumber. "I could almost envy him, but not his mine. My little Minna would have looked like that! And the same age, too."

Major Magnet subdued a smile as he caught that faint sigh, for he was too true a friend to draw comparisons between Minna dead and this beauty living, even though he recalled the fat, chubby, china-doll face of which Paul Oberland had once showed him a counterfeit.

Just then the whistle announced their approach to a station, and at the sound Paul Oberland was once more the active, bustling conductor with not a trace of sentiment in his whole being.

The sound startled Miss Bryer from her doze, and the start she gave pinched the white fingers of Creed Ashmole, bringing a bright smile into his handsome face and soft words to his lips as the maiden turned quickly toward him with a brief apology.

Major Magnet saw this, though he failed to catch the words which passed their lips. His brows contracted, and his face grew graver, harder, more stern than usual.

It was a striking rather than a handsome face, though none might call him homely or bad-looking; the face of a man who has lived and suffered: of one who still has an object in living beyond the ordinary love of life which belongs to us all.

Major Magnet was but little above the average height of his sex, and of not more than average weight, seeming just such a man as one meets in every crowd without calling for a second glance.

He wore a plain business suit of mixed goods, "pepper and salt." A small soft felt hat rested over his iron-gray locks. His linen was speckless but unpolished, its front unadorned by stud or pin, a plain pearl button securing his turn-over collar, unadorned by tie or scarf.

His face was a little less common, though his features were strong rather than regular or handsome. His eyes were rather small, set under heavy brows of shaggy gray, keen and penetrating, cold and steady as though made of the polished metal which they resembled. His nose was rather long and thin, his nostrils flexible. His lips were shaded by a heavy pair of mustaches which joined iron-gray whiskers, leaving his strong, square chin bare.

His years were fewer than the white threads in his hair would indicate at first glance, and there was an easy pantherish grace and smoothness in his every action that would have warned a close student of human nature to beware of angering him too deeply.

When the train stopped at the station, Major Magnet rose from his seat and stepped to the front platform, though he had no intention of alighting, as was speedily proved. The pause was but brief, and, as the engine again moved forward, he turned back, dropping into a seat near the forward end of the coach, and which was turned so as to bring his face to the rear, thus affording him a fair opportunity for studying the fair young face which had so powerfully interested him from the first glimpse he caught of it. And when Paul Oberland came back to the car, a nod from the major induced him to occupy the seat opposite.

If any passengers had taken the train at that station, they must have entered the smoker, so the conductor had no business on his hands just then.

"Still studying the beautiful, eh, major?" laughed the jolly official as he gave a slight backward nod to point his meaning.

"Tell me more about her, please," quietly

requested Major Magnet, with nothing more to betray the strong interest which he really felt. "This is her first visit to Animas?"

"Is it not plain, then?" with an over-the-ocean shrug of his broad shoulders. "Is it a face like that—rose and lily—you run over at each turn out here—eh?"

"What of the kind frau, Oberland?" smiled the major.

"She would say, like me, that it is the face of our dead Minna. She would fall heels-up in loaf—you can laugh, then, my friend?" breaking off abruptly with a frown as he caught the smile in that face.

"Not at your sentiment, but your choice of words, Oberland," laughing softly as he added: "The modest frau would hardly like that, old fellow, but I'll have to tell her when we meet. Do you wear a wig?"

The conductor laughed honestly, once more himself.

"It tangles my English all up whenever I think of our little Minna, major; but we'll turn those heels down again and take a fresh departure. First visit? I fancy so. Indeed, I am sure of it. Miss Bryer asked me far too many questions through the day to be an old traveler in the mountains."

"Then she is making the trip alone?" with a swift glance toward Creed Ashmole, once more gazing silently out into the night.

Oberland shook his head in dissent.

"It is as you have guessed, major," his puffy lips tightly compressing for a moment. "Ashmole is with her. You know him?"

"I know of him slightly."

"He is a sort of factotum—so?" a little doubtful as to his choice of a term. "He serves the man of gold. He writes, figures, runs here and yonder—a sort of secretary, clerk, confidential man of business, I take it. It is a clumsy language, your English, my friend!"

Major Magnet frowned, one hand pushing the gray hairs between his strong teeth as his keen eyes roved from face to face of the young couple before him, neither of whom showed any consciousness of his scrutiny.

"He ought to be nearer and dearer than that, to share such blind confidence. Maybe the old gentleman has looked ahead, though. Ashmole is a lucky man if that is true!"

"Too lucky," nodded Oberland, heaving a sigh despite the fact of his worthy frau. "He is good enough, as young men go, I dare say, but—it is not my little Minna that should mate with him—no!"

"Do you know any absolute evil of him, then?" asked the major with a curious eagerness underlying his assumed composure.

That question was never answered, for just at that moment, without the slightest warning or signal of danger, the train abruptly checked its rapid motion, the cars bumping violently together, almost flinging the passengers from their seats to the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN OF NERVE.

INSTANTLY all was confusion and uproar in the coach. Women broke into shrill screams of terror, and men uttered cries and curses of angry fright or excited wonder.

"It is nothing! Keep your seats!" shouted Paul Oberland as well as he could while picking himself up from the lap of Major Magnet, whom his corpulent form held temporarily helpless.

But even as the words passed his lips, the sharp crackling of firearms broke upon the night, bullets cutting round holes through the windows and splintering the blinds and other woodwork. And blending with this awful salute came the stern commands:

"Steady, in thar! Empty fingers or empty skulls!"

A pistol or rifle-shot punctuated that crisp speech, and as by magic the startled screams of the women died away in speechless terror.

As quickly as he could for that human catapult which had fairly driven the breath from his body, Major Magnet looked for Miss Bryer, giving a quick breath of relief as he saw her still uninjured, just rising to her feet from the seat in front, over the back of which she had been doubled by that sudden stoppage.

But a frown darkened his face and something harsh escaped his lips as he saw Creed Ashmole swiftly change seats, slipping into that beside the lady, drawing her to the cushion with an arm about her waist.

"To cover his own carcass, the coward!" came gratingly through the clinched teeth of the major, though in this he did the young man injustice, for it was only the necessity of haste that guided Ashmole.

"Keep your seats in thar!" came that menacing voice once more, as another irregular volley came spat-spating through the glass divisions between the ventilators overhead, with a few through such windows as showed no human torso. "Riddle the fu'st critter to make a break, boys!"

A bit of lead tore its way across the bosom of the conductor who had left his seat for the aisle,

and Major Magnet thrust out an arm to push him into a seat opposite, sternly saying:

"Kicking'll do no good, pard, and you want to think of the good frau—sit down, I tell you!"

Even as he uttered those hasty words, his free hand was loosening his clothes over the weapons which he habitually carried, and there was nothing of cowardice to be seen in his face or his redly glowing eyes. He had not lightly earned his sub-title of the Man of Nerve, as that night was fated to still more clearly prove.

But courage is not always foolhardiness, and he knew how worse than useless would be any premature attempt at placing those harsh commands at defiance.

The coach was not half filled, and of the score and a half passengers contained therein, more than two-thirds were women or children. And of the few men, hardly one but what showed far too great excitement to be counted on in a fight to the death, each one frantically striving to conceal his valuables, too often in the most impossible or absurd fashion and places.

"Stiddy thar, you p'izen critters!" came a harsh voice from the rear end of the coach as the door was flung violently open. "Empty hands, mind ye! Never mind your pockets, fer we'd ruther do the emptyin' business our own way. Stiddy—an' keep 'em stiddy, pards, ef you hev to onroof every durned skull in the caboose!"

"That's what!" came hoarsely from the other doorway.

Major Magnet did not turn his head as this voice came from close behind him. It was not fear that held him motionless, but his gaze was fixed upon Creed Ashmole and Miss Bryer.

Her face was pale as that of a corpse, but after that first involuntary cry as she felt that heavy shock, not a sound escaped her lips. She seemed unconscious of that protecting arm about her waist, and her queenly head was held erect, her great eyes roving swiftly about her.

Even in that exciting moment Major Magnet felt a strange thrill of joy and relief as he saw how Rose Bryer stood the ordeal.

"She don't love him, or her head would be on his breast!" flashed through his busy brain.

Just then Creed Ashmole rose to his feet, turning toward the masked train robber who held the rear of the coach, hoarsely crying out as he extended a hand with a pocketbook in it:

"Here's my money, sir. Take it—but if you're a man, let this lady pass out to fresh air. She's fainting—it'll kill her!"

He tossed the book toward the outlaw, then lifted Rose Bryer in his strong arms and dashed hastily toward the rear door, unheeding the bullet which came crashing through the window, to almost brush his ear.

The plump notebook fell to the floor and rolled under one of the seats. The outlaw sprung forward and dropped on his knees in his haste to secure the tempting prize, while Creed Ashmole sprang past him to the rear platform, leaping to the ground with Rose Bryer in his arms.

All this occurred with such rapidity that but the one arresting shot was fired, and even Major Magnet could make no move to interfere, even if he would have done so on second thoughts. And to do that would almost surely result in death now, for a harsh order came rolling down the aisle:

"Keep your seats, all! The first to leave 'em'll drop too heavy to ever rise up ag'in 'thout help! Shet an' lock that door, pard!"

Thrusting the pocketbook into his bosom, the grotesquely-masked rascal obeyed, seemingly unaware that his greed had resulted in the temporary escape of two of their prey.

"Business is business, an' we're its prophets, pilgrims," in a more placable tone added the speaker from the front of the coach, leaving his station and striding down the aisle until near the middle, pausing and turning his ugly mask toward each of the frightened people in rotation as he resumed:

"It ain't be-lud we're thirstin' fer, nigh so much as ducats an' tickers an' sparklers an' sech like as them. But ef we hev to sup red, we'll fill the bowl to sloppin' over—you hear me toot!"

He lifted a coarsely-gloved hand, and as though in obedience to the motion, several bullets came spattering through the windows, the spraying glass sparkling like frost in the lamplight.

"Kickin' won't do no good. Contrariwise, it'll measure each hoof fer a dirt cabin. You're each one kivered, even ef you cain't see the kiverer, an' ef a weepson comes out when I call fer ducats, so much the wuss fer the fool as makes the mistake!"

He retreated until beyond the rearmost passenger, then slipped a substantial wheat-sack from beneath the belt at his back, hitching it to his bosom by means of two stout hooks, thus leaving his hands free to manipulate his pistols in case of need.

"Jest play like ye was in church, and the Gospel-slinger hed hit yer right in your pockets, pard," he grinned, advancing with his fellow mask, pausing before the first passenger they came to. "An' this ain't 'posed to be a congregation o' hypocrites, nuther, mind ye, ladies and gents. The Muck-a-mucks o' Animas jest more'n love a cheerful giver, but they 'tarnally 'spises one that hides his wealth, an' then pleads

poverty fer not milkin' down richer. An'—what sort o' justice does we mete onto sich as them, pard?"

"Blue pills, powder-hot!"

"That's the way our Bible reads, ladies an' gents, so—thunk better of it, didn't ye?"

The humorous rascal laughed loudly as the pale-faced passenger reluctantly drew a roll of bills from his bootleg, into which he had thrust it at the first alarm of train-robbers.

Outwardly cool and unmoved, Major Magnet watched all this work, his face pale but immobile as though he wore a mask as insensitive as the grotesque fabrications with which the Muck-a-mucks had concealed their features.

He cast one swift glance backward, failing to distinguish any of the outlaws at that door, though he could hardly hope that it was left wholly unguarded.

Steadily the Muck-a-mucks advanced, securing their contributions from each passenger, more than once pausing to search one who was suspected of trying to cheat the toll-takers, not even sparing the women.

Watching his chance, when the two toll-takers were busied with an especially reluctant passenger, the major quickly drew down the blinds to both windows near his two seats, coolly elevating his empty hands as the clicking springs startled the outlaws into facing him with ready weapons.

"Spare your powder, gents," he cried out, easily. "I'm playing into your hands, don't you see?"

"I'll play *you*, critter, ef you try to come any tricks on travelers!" flashed the biggest of the outlaws, his eyes glowing redly through his false-face.

"I was tempted to make a bolt through the window, and just saved my neck by pulling down the blinds," smiled the Man of Nerve.

"You'll git saved 'nother way ef you don't simmer an' keep shet. Git your pile ready ag'in' we git thar, fer I ain't noways stuck onto that mug o' ye, anyhow!"

Major Magnet made no further reply, but his hands went down into his pockets, his face calm and innocent as could be wished, whatever lay behind that practiced mask.

Despite the delay caused by the insatiable greed of the two masked rascals, one searching while his mate held the victim covered by a brace of heavy pistols, the work could not consume much time, measured after the ordinary fashion, for the passengers were few in number and too thoroughly frightened to offer much difficulty.

As the robbers drew nearer him, Major Magnet took his hands from his pockets, but they came forth empty, despite the stern warning which had been given him.

"Now, hot-head, we'll milk *you*," grimly uttered the burly rascal with the revolvers as his flashing eyes rested on the Man of Nerve. "An' ef you don't pail right piert, durned ef I don't clip a ear to know ye better when the next round-up comes to time—ye hear?"

The two men were now standing directly in front of the facing seats, and Major Magnet rose to his feet, his left hand slipping into his pocket as though in quest of his money.

Instead, his right hand shot out, clutching the man with the pistol by the throat, his clinched left fist dashing like lightning into his masked face as he was jerked forward and flung on the floor.

And before the searcher could spring back or draw a weapon, Major Magnet had him foul, twisting him around so that they both faced the door in the front of the car, one arm pinning both hands helplessly for the moment.

He sunk into the rear seat, drawing the outlaw down upon his lap and covering himself thus. A gleaming knife flashed in his left hand, its point turned to prick the rascal's throat, his right gripping a revolver that covered the masked figures which leaped upon the front platform, his feet trampling heavily upon the stunned outlaw on the floor as he cried out, sharply:

"Play we don't, gents! I reckon I'm High Muck-a-muck just at present, and if you want to know my other titles, call me Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve!"

It seemed like the work of magic, and the stupefied rascal who was held as a shield, fairly shrieked aloud as he felt that keen point penetrating the flesh of his throat.

CHAPTER V.

FROM FRYING-PAN TO FIRE.

MAJOR MAGNET gave Miss Rose Bryer rather more credit than she really deserved, in that time of stern trial, for it was hardly courage alone that sustained her, that kept her lips sealed where her fellow passengers were wailing or sobbing in terror.

As the train felt the full force of the powerful air-brakes, the shock flung the maiden forward against the seat-back in front of her chosen position, and though she received no material injury from the blow, it partially deprived her of breath. And the rest of that went out in the truly feminine scream which parted her lips as the lead began to spray glass all through the coach.

She sat still, because she had no power left with which to spring to her feet and into the aisle. She did not shriek again, through lack of breath rather than from excess of courage, as Major Magnet fancied.

She was a woman, with all the average woman's dread of firearms, violence, and all such disagreeables.

She was so terribly frightened that she hardly knew it when Creed Ashmole left his seat to slip into the one by her side, and though a slight shiver ran through her frame as his arm stole about her waist, clasping her firmly, tenderly, protectingly, she seemed unconscious of that public embrace.

"Don't scream—don't be scared, my darling!" hurriedly whispered the young man, his tones so shaken as to be hardly articulate. "I'll guard you with my life! I'll be shot to little bits before a single hair of your head shall be injured!"

If Rose Bryer heard him, she gave no sign. She sat rigidly erect, her fair face pale as that of a corpse, her great eyes passing from one object to another with a searching yet unseeing gaze.

For the time being it seemed as though her brain was paralyzed, so far as the power of thought was concerned.

Creed Ashmole himself showed far more agitation than did his fair young charge, and of the two he seemed far less steady nerved.

His color came and went by fits and starts. His eyes flashed back and forth, not unlike those of a wild animal which finds itself cornered and cut off from all escape unless by desperately breaking through the closely drawn ranks of its enemies. His free hand visibly trembled, his breath came short and quick.

Then the grotesquely disguised Muck-a-mucks showed themselves at either end of the coach, pistol in hand and warning words on lips, cutting off all escape without running the gantlet of their fire.

"Be brave, my darling!" huskily whispered Ashmole, but without turning toward his companion, his glowing eyes fixed on the enemy, now in front, now at the rear door. "I'll protect you at any cost! Those devils can't harm you while—"

The arm about her waist contracted so sharply, so fiercely, that it forced a gasp of pain from her colorless lips, but Creed Ashmole made no apology, if, indeed, he noticed this, though he whispered in hot haste:

"Rose, my precious! I fear for you! Fear worse than mere robbery threatens! Will you trust me? Is your faith strong enough for that?"

If any reply came from those pallid lips, the words were drowned by the coarse voice of the Muck-a-muck repeating his warning against any attempt at escape or refractory conduct.

"There's one chance, dearest," added Ashmole, as he swiftly pulled the veil further over her face. "They may not have recognized you as yet, and if we can pass the door—We must and shall!"

It was then that he sprung to his feet, producing his well-filled wallet, and tossing it toward the masked outlaw guarding the rear end of the coach, uttering the words which have already found a record.

He caught the maiden up in his strong arms, as though he felt her weight no more than he might that of an infant. He sprung down the aisle, and past the greedy rascal, who was on his knees, with head and shoulders thrust under the seats, in search of the pocketbook. Past him and through the door, to pause but for a single breath on the platform, before leaping with his shivering burden out into the gloom.

A faint cry parted the lips of Rose Bryer, as that blind leap was taken, and the shock seemed to break the curious spell which had fallen upon her with the first coming of the train-robbers.

"Don't fear—for your life, don't cry out!" hurriedly panted Creed Ashmole, as he steadied himself with some difficulty. "It was the only way—the only hope. It would mean worse than death, were those devils to fasten their clutches upon you, my precious!"

The maiden shivered and shrunk from that term of endearment, the first which had not passed unnoticed.

"Let me down—I can walk," she said, with a sudden exertion which brought her feet to the ground.

At that moment a sharp explosion came from close beside them, and the ruddy glare of burning powder briefly lighted up their features.

With a low, fierce ejaculation, Creed Ashmole lifted the maiden in his arms, and sprang forward, though he knew that they had been seen by the outlaws, and that escape thus burdened was almost impossible, should any decided effort be made to check it.

"Hold on, thar—you!" came a hoarse voice from the gloom. "Show your pass, or—Look to the petticoats, pard; he's my meat!"

"Run, Rose!" hoarsely cried Ashmole, relinquishing his grasp in order to meet that savage assault. "I'll find you as soon—"

"An' I've found you a'ready, durn ye!" growled the Muck-a-muck, as he leaped straight at the

throat of the young man, closing and falling to the ground together in what bid fair to prove a death-struggle.

In relinquishing his grasp, Ashmole pushed Rose Bryer almost into the arms of the second outlaw, whose coarse laugh rung out in triumph.

"Petticoat goes, an' I know who's got the tenderest morsel, pard! Come to me arms, pritty, an' nobody sha'n't—hold on, durn ye!"

His fingers missed her arm, but closed on a portion of her linen ulster as the maiden shrunk away. Even then he might have secured his coveted prize, only for his foot turning on a loose stone, tangling his legs all up and pitching him forward upon his face, almost overthrowing the girl as he fell.

With a panting cry Rose turned and darted away through the gloom, knowing nothing of what lay before her, urged on by sudden horror of falling alive into the clutches of those uncouth ruffians.

Spluttering oaths and threats commingled, the clumsy rascal regained his feet and plunged forward in angry chase, though already the darkness had hidden the figure of his coveted prize from his eyes.

With her skirts lifted to clear the obstacles which might prove fatal to her hopes of escape, Rose Bryer fled blindly, only conscious just then of one aim: to leave the train and its terrifying captors as far behind as possible while her strength lasted.

Although they had passed without recognition at the time, those hurried fears of Creed Ashmole kept ringing in her ears now, until she would almost have chosen death before falling into the clutches of the train robbers.

As already mentioned, the train had passed around the curve and cleared the deep cut before coming to a halt at the red danger signal swung by the High Muck-a-muck of Animas.

The track ran on in a straight line for a considerable distance. On one side of the line the ground lay comparatively level, but on the other, which was the side to which Creed Ashmole had leaped with his fair burden, there was but a little space of level, then rising into broken ground, here a point, there a gully or defile, yonder a pitch of scrubby trees and stunted bushes.

It was difficult ground to cover even with the aid of daylight, just at this point, but doubly so when the eyes were of little aid to headlong flight. The rocks were thickly strewn over the hillside, and miniature pitfalls abounded.

Though her heavy-footed pursuer almost immediately stumbled into one of these, pitching upon his masked face again with many a vicious oath and savage threat, Rose Bryer seemed guided by a good angel, for she neither tripped nor stumbled, fleeing rapidly when the natural difficulties are taken into consideration, though to her own excited imagination her feet seemed shod with lead.

"Wake up thar, durn ye!" shouted the outlaw, savagely. "The critter 'll git clean off an' then the boss—cut her off, some o' ye!"

With terrifying distinctness the maiden caught these words, and believing that other enemies must be in her path, she turned abruptly to her right, choking back a sob of despair as she felt her bodily powers beginning to fail her.

In the darkness she struck against a high rock. Turning sharply aside, she came in contact with another. She staggered blindly, fearing lest she had unwittingly run into a trap from whence there was no exit, save by retracing her steps. And that meant going direct into the hands of the train-robbers, for she could hear heavy footsteps and harsh voices rapidly drawing nearer.

She staggered once more, a shoulder brushing the perpendicular rock, but hope hardly began to dawn before despair blackened the prospect again. The two walls of rock came together, barring her path. She was in a narrow pocket and could go no further.

With a stifled moan the poor girl sunk into a limp, nerveless heap, bowing her head and covering her face with her hands.

Not until that moment did she realize how killing had been her efforts to escape, how utterly that desperate struggle against odds had exhausted her bodily powers.

Her brain throbbed heavily. Her breath seemed to scorch her throat as it came in short, painful gasps. A cruel hand seemed tightening about her heart, slowly but surely suffocating her.

"She was headed this way when I see'd her last," uttered a coarse, disagreeable voice, so close that the poor fugitive tried to hold her breath and calm the heavy throbings of her heart, lest the sound betray her presence to those dreaded enemies.

"How the devil did you let her slip you?"

Rose gave a faint gasp and lifted her head, staring bewilderingly through the gloom, for that voice—surely it was the voice of Creed Ashmole, the one to whose care her father had intrusted her, the man who had risked his life in order to preserve her from falling into the hands of the train-robbers?

In her confused agitation she missed the answer, if any was given, but she caught each note

of the next speech—how marvelously like unto the voice of Creed Ashmole!

"Scatter and search! Get lights, some of you. We've got to find her, if it takes a month—got to, you hear? Fiends and furies!" with vicious rage at the reflection. "After so much plotting—to lose the richest prize of all, through your infernal clumsiness!"

There came the sound of a heavy blow, a smothered cry and curse combined, a scrambling fall over some obstacle. Shudderingly the poor girl bowed her head, and covered her ears tightly with her trembling hands.

Dimly she heard other sounds, but these quickly died away as if the villains were turning their attention to other quarters, believing her still in flight, and fearing to delay lest she escape them wholly.

Then her overtaken powers gave way entirely, and she lay like one bereft of life for a space—how long she never knew. And when her senses returned, she rose to her feet and blindly staggered out of the pocket—to fall helplessly into strong hands the next moment.

CHAPTER VI.

LITTLE FIREFLY.

A SHRIEK of terror and despair broke from her lips, only to be cut short by the heavy hand of her captor. The broad palm closed her lips and almost took away her breath, though no more violence was used than could well be avoided under the circumstances.

A strong arm was about her waist, holding her firmly to a broad bosom, and the hot breath of her captor fanned her cheek as he said with a coarse, grim chuckle:

"Thought you'd got it down mighty fine, didn't ye, pritty? Thought you'd cram my peepers so full o' dust they wouldn't be room fer seein' even your bigness when you stole out o' your hold—eh?"

"Mercy—don't kill—"

"Good Lawd! who's thinkin' o' killin' anybody?" spluttered the outlaw, in tones of undisguised amazement, though his grip did not relax, beyond holding his palm less tightly over her lips. "Not me, an' not you, fer a mighty sight o' sureness! They's a heap too much wealth wrapped up into that dainty pelt o' yourn fer any rough handlin' afore the right strings is pulled an'—but this ain't business, ma'am, an' ef you'll 'scuse the liberty, why—"

With a deft movement he lifted the maiden in his strong arms and moved away from the pocket, speaking again as soon as the way grew less difficult:

"Ef ye can't take it easy, ma'am, take it as easy as ye kin! 'Tain't in me to do ye any great hurt, though I *did* git a mouthful o' loose teeth jest a bit ago fer lettin' of ye take so long a run. But I ain't layin' that up ag'inst you!" with an emphasis on the pronoun that promised less for the one who had dealt that angry blow.

"Let me down. I can walk, now," said Rose, steadying her voice by a painful effort, yet not a little reassured by the words of her captor, so different from what she had been led to expect.

"Waal, ef you d ruther," grunted the Muck-a-muck, pausing to lower his burden until her feet touched the earth once more. "But, mine ye," with sudden suspicion in his tones as his fingers closed sharply on her arm: "ef you try to trick me ag'in like you did fust off, they'll be heap wuss then I've give ye so fur."

"What is to be my fate? Why are you persecuting me so bitterly?"

"Looky, ma'am," and the outlaw turned his captive until they stood face to face under the dim starlight, now seeming brighter as the moon gave tokens of rising over the hills to the east. "I want to treat you white, but they's sech a thing as totin' too limber a clapper, an' I'm likin' the safest side heap the best. So—ax me no questions an' I'll tell you fewer lies. You savey?"

For one breath the poor girl felt tempted to try and escape, to wrest her arm free from that grasp and dash away through the night to avoid—what?

That was the worst of it all! If she could only know what fate these evil beings held in store for her, she felt that she could face it more courageously. It was the very vagueness of her fears that made them so terrible.

The eyes which shone through the twin apertures in that hideous mask seemed to read her thoughts, for the grip tightened and the outlaw forced her on over the rough ground, saying harshly:

"Wimmen is the devil, an' you're fuller then the most! The sooner I git shet o' ye the easier I'll pump wind—that's what!"

Realizing the uselessness of trying to break away from that firm grip, Rose Bryer submitted without a murmur, bravely striving to keep pace with the outlaw, though she tripped and stumbled at almost every step, the way was so difficult at first. But presently this grew more practicable. The steep slope was left behind them and the way grew more level, though they were still in plain view of the lighted cars.

Only for a little while. Her captor turned abruptly to the right and then veered gradually around until the point of rocks cut off the view,

leaving them, as it seemed, the sole inhabitants of that dreary waste. And as she saw this, a fresh terror began to assail the maiden.

"Where are you taking me to, sir?" she ventured, faintly, shrinking as though expecting a blow or a curse.

"To one who'll know heap better than me how to manidge sech a critter," was the gruff reply.

"Not—not the one who struck you, back yonder?"

"Eh? What do you know 'bout him?"

"Nothing—only I thought—"

"Don't ye do no more o' that thinkin' ef ye know when you're well off, ma'am. I feel sort o' pityin' like t'ords ye, so fur, but when ye come to rubbin' in that dirty lick—shet clam, I tell ye!"

Rose ventured to ask no further information, though she could not help wondering whether or no she had really recognized the voice of Creed Ashmole while hiding in that black pocket. If so—but it was worse than folly! He could not be so utterly vile!

"Thar's the fire, an' yender's the one I'm gwine fer to putt you in keer of," suddenly uttered her captor, pointing ahead to a faint glow as of a camp-fire. "An' mighty glad I'll be when I've done it, too! I wasn't cut out fer tofin' wimmen all over the kentry, nohow!"

"Who comes?" rung out a clear, musical voice a moment later, followed by the significant click of a lifting hammer.

"A Muck-a-muck, Little Firefly!" promptly answered the outlaw. "An' I've got a female critter hyar fer you to tuck under the wing o' ye."

A horse and rider shot through the fringe of shrubbery, both outlined against the lighter background, forming a goodly picture even to the frightened eyes of the hunted maiden.

A slender, willowy figure, clad in brilliant-hued garments of Spanish cut, lavishly trimmed and ornamented with gold lace and buttons of both precious metals glittering brightly as the firelight sifted through the foliage and glanced from the polished surfaces.

A wide-brimmed sombrero bore a plume of brightest scarlet, which was matched in color by the girdle of soft crape about the trim waist, half concealing the brace of revolvers and a pearl-handled bowie secured in the morocco belt.

The face was in the shadow, and little but the general outline could be made out just then, yet Rose felt a sudden confidence in its owner, perhaps because from its contrast to that hideous mask at her side. And breaking away from the outlaw she sprang forward to brokenly utter:

"You will protect me? You will not let them do me harm?"

"Be sure I'll guard you, lady," came that musical voice as its owner leaped lightly to the ground and flung an arm about the waist of the trembling maiden. "And you, my fine fellow," flashing a glance toward the outlaw, "say your prayers if you've treated her with any more force than strictly necessary!"

"I'll leave it to her ef I hev," sulkily muttered the fellow, visibly shrinking. "'Course I hed to keep her from boltin' ag'in, but—"

Little Firefly did not stop to hear his excuses, but drew Rose through the bushes into the dim glow of a camp-fire, now burnt low. And then Rose knew the truth, no longer shrinking from that familiar arm.

"You are a girl—a woman, like myself!" she exclaimed.

"I wish I was—as beautiful, I mean, of course," with a light laugh that was plainly assumed for a purpose. "A woman, and your friend I trust—a friend I know unless you forbid it."

"Yet—"

"Yet you find me in this garb, in such evil company; is that it, Miss Bryer?" laughed Little Firefly, finishing that broken sentence with cool grace, though a faint increase of color in her cheeks told of a conscience not yet fully seared. "We can't always choose what we might like best, or you wouldn't be here in my company. Yet, I flatter myself that you might well be in worse, if I am one of the terrible Muck-a-mucks of Animas."

"You know my name?" asked Rose, in bewilderment.

"Is that so surprising, when I tell you that I came here to-night on this raid solely and entirely on your account?" laughed the strange girl. "I might say even more—but the mood isn't on me, after all."

The change was abrupt, and Rose caught that quick frown before the girl turned her face away: a face darkened by the action of the sun, yet rarely beautiful with its great dark eyes, its delicate features and rosy lips.

She gazed about her in bewilderment that was hardly lessened as she noted a horse standing near, bearing a sidesaddle. Yet Little Firefly had been mounted on another, with saddle befitting the garb she wore.

Little Firefly took the reins from the masked man who had been holding the horse, leading it nearer to Rose Bryer, laughing softly as she said:

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies, Miss Bryer. Play it was mine, is yours, and permit me to assist you into the saddle."

The poor girl was too thoroughly bewildered to think of resisting even this, and almost ere she knew it Little Firefly had her safely in the saddle, herself mounted and sitting beside her.

"Nothing like being in readiness, you know, my dear," she lightly spoke, though there was a ring to her tones that belied her outward easiness. "These be parlous times, and it's part of our creed to ever be ready to flit at a moment's warning."

"Tell me, do you know him?" quickly cried Rose, catching at one of the words pronounced by her bright guardian. "Creed Ashmole, I mean?"

"What kind of a mole did you say?" and Little Firefly opened her dark eyes widely, her beautiful face blank in its expression.

"Mr. Creed Ashmole, the gentleman who—tell me he is not the wicked being I began to fear!"

"He's a saint on earth, if you want it that way, Miss Bryer," laughed Little Firefly. "And, if that isn't enough to quiet your fears, I'll make it still stronger."

"I want the simple truth!" with sudden energy. "Is he part of your evil band? Is he a traitor to me, to my dear father? Did he take me from the coach on purpose to throw me into your hands? Tell me the truth, if you are an honest woman!"

"I am Little Firefly, Queen of the Muck-a-mucks," with a low bow and mocking laugh. "Being that individual, and seeing what you must have seen this night, how can you even dream of my being honest?"

"You are a woman, at least, and as such I ask you once more—"

"And I tell you that I never saw your Mr. Ashmole. So far as I know to the contrary, he is a saint in trowsers. But—I'm thinking far more of my own—of the High Muck-a-muck. I don't like this long delay—do you?" turning sharply toward the masked outlaw.

"Pears like it's takin' a mighty sight o' powder an' time jest fer the work the boss cut out, ma'am."

"Keep an eye on the lady, and see that all's well when I come back," curtly ordered Little Firefly, touching her horse with the spur and plunging through the bushes, riding at reckless speed toward the divided train, leaving Rose Bryer with but a single guard.

That guard seemed careful enough, for he stood with a hand on the reins of her horse, but his face was kept turned in the direction of the train, and occasional mutterings told of a mind ill at ease. He, too, was chafing over the unexpected delay, but he soon had cause for other fears, if he had only known as much as Rose Bryer.

She caught a glimpse of a dark figure stealing through the bushes and then leaping forward as though to attack—which one?

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAJOR PLAYS A LONE HAND.

It was a curious scene, all told, but it may well be doubted if any one present fully appreciated it, without that exception was Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.

The larger of the two toll-takers was wedged under the seats, head-foremost, with the feet of the major resting heavily on the broad of his back.

The second of the masked rascals sat upon the major's lap, held there by those strong arms independent of the hands, each one of which gripped a deadly weapon, the left pressing the bared blade against the throat of the screaming robber, the right covering with a revolver the startled outlaws just visible through the open door at the head of the coach.

Back of this one reckless man, passengers, both male and female, betrayed the wildest consternation, some even going so far as to crawl under the seats, the better to protect their persons from the bullets which must surely begin to fly, others too badly frightened to do more than shiver and shrink away while several of the men who had already been stripped of their property, wildly cursed the madman who thus tempted death for himself and for them.

"Empty hands, you Muck-a-mucks!" cried the Man of Nerve, his tones sharp and commanding, his gray eyes glowing as though backed by living fires. "Your first kick sends Johnny, here, to everlasting glory!"

"Shoot—kill the durned—mercy!"

That steady hand contracted a bit, sending the keen point fairly through the skin and bringing a bright red drop rolling down its polished surface, turning that savage appeal into a muffled howl of mingled pain and terror.

"You see the lay-out, Muck-a-mucks of Animas," grimly laughed the major, throwing more of his weight upon the burly outlaw under the seats as that individual began to show signs of recovering his senses, scattered by that terrible blow in the face. "I hold the age. If you come in, Johnny goes out, busted for good. Even a snap-shot can't save him, though I'll do it if one is risked—'save' him for all eternity!"

"Don't! I'm bleedin' to death!" gasped the frightened desperado, yet not daring to make

the slightest attempt to break away from those steel-like arms.

"Lift a hand or show a gun and off comes his cabeza, gents!" added the major, his tones clear and cold, betraying not the slightest anxiety as to the final outcome of that curious deadlock. "Lightning itself couldn't hinder my driving this good bit of steel home, and you're a long ways from being that."

"Let up on him, an' we'll call it squar'!" came a hoarse voice from the platform. "You can't buck ag'inst the hull gang, durn ye!"

"Then I'll turn recruiting officer," retorted the major, crying out sharply to the frightened passengers at his back: "Brace up, you men! Save your manhood, if you did give up your wealth! Pull your guns and we'll clean them out even yet!"

Instead there came groans and curses on his bullheadedness from more than one, and instead of rallying, the demoralized fellows only sought to more effectually cover their precious carcasses.

Major Magnet never shifted his keen gaze from his enemies in front, but he knew only too well how little he had to hope for from those cowards, as he mentally branded each and every man among the travelers.

In his own utter ignorance of personal fear, he forgot how differently they might be constituted, how completely they were demoralized by that sudden shock and swiftly following attack.

After all, they had more to lose than to win, since the train robbers had already stripped them of their money and other valuables.

"You're the only fool aboard, Major Magnet," came from the platform ahead, the tones ringing with triumph as the speaker saw how vain was that crisp appeal. "You don't often go wrong, but you've bit off too mighty big a chew this time!"

The Man of Nerve began to think much the same thing himself, but nothing of the sort appeared on his strong face. Without backing of some sort, he could not hope to hold his present advantage much longer, for the reckless train-robbers were hardly men to stand in awe through fear of seeing one of their number die.

"Say that again, and say it slow, will you?" he coolly cried, at the same time preparing himself for a desperate effort, tightening his grip on his living shield and lifting himself clear of the cushioned seat.

His purpose was to make a sudden rush for the door, trusting to luck to carry him through in safety, but it was not to end thus.

He saw a hairy paw fastened to the ledge of the open window directly opposite, swiftly followed by a masked head and a gleaming revolver, the muzzle pointed directly for his head, the weapon exploding so quickly that he could hardly have avoided death of himself.

But, providentially, the rascal beneath his feet gave a sudden lurch, tipping him backward, even as he caught sight of that weapon, and the heavy bullet crashed through the skull of the outlaw in his arms.

Death was instantaneous. Not even a groan came from those lips, and he sunk a limp, shivering weight upon the arm of the major, his blood and brains spattering the daring fellow's face.

It was a ghastly tragedy, and startled none more than the outlaw whose hand had done the bloody work, for with a howl of frightened rage he dropped out of sight the next instant.

The sight seemed to paralyze the Muck-a-mucks on the platform, too, since not one of them took advantage of the opportunity, though for a single breath the head and throat of the major were fully exposed to their weapons. Then—

Major Magnet dropped his knife and pistol, lifting the quivering body in his arms and pitching it headlong through the doorway into the midst of its once comrades, uttering a short, defiant cry as he gave a swift, dexterous leap that shot him feet first through the open window from whence that fatal shot had come, vanishing from sight of his startled adversaries!

The daring man alighted safely on his feet, and recovered himself with cat-like quickness, dodging back and under the coach, a second revolver gripped in his right hand, ready for use in case of need.

His eyes were swept keenly around, and he caught a bare glimpse of a dusky figure running away from the spot, no doubt being the unintentional assassin of his fellow sinner.

"Scatter and take him in!" thundered a hoarse voice, followed by rapid leaps from the platform and hasty rushing away for a short distance into the gloom.

Major Magnet smiled grimly from under the car, squatted on the big brake beam, but he moved not a muscle, even when one of the outlaws stooped and scrambled under the coach, almost brushing against his bent knees while in the act.

"He's cut an' run fer it!" this fellow spluttered, after his blind search. "They ain't nobody hidin' in hyar, anyhow!"

"Find him if it takes all night, curse you!" added that voice, and its owner sprang from the platform to add his efforts to theirs.

"It'll be eternity to more than one if you do!"

reflected the major, following their movements more with his ears than his eyes.

He was far from being bloodthirsty, but he knew that death was morally certain in case he should be discovered, and the Muck-a-mucks had won too evil a reputation for themselves by their reckless disregard of human lives in their pursuit of wealth, for an honest man to lose his own life rather than take one or more of theirs in self-defense.

Satisfied that the coast was clear for a moment, Major Magnet left his covert and slipped around to where the dead Muck-a-muck had fallen, pausing beside the corpse and working swiftly, for he remembered that the fellow wore a long, loose ulster the more effectually to disguise his person, and that would prove a partial safeguard in the gloom which still prevailed.

Stripping off the garment he quickly donned it, then rose and sprung beyond the light coming through the bullet-pierced windows, pausing again to gaze keenly, anxiously about him, bending his ear in listening.

"Where is she? Could that idiot have escaped with her? Or—is he playing into the hands of the Muck-a-mucks?"

Major Magnet had no thoughts for himself just then. His busy brain was filled with doubts and fears enough, but all were occasioned by Rose Bryer and her possible fate.

It would have troubled him sorely to explain just why he doubted Creed Ashmole, on that occasion, but doubt him he did, and had, ever since he witnessed his escape from the coach.

"Why didn't they stop him? Why let him slip out before being searched, as all the rest were? It's crooked, and I'm betting my head on it!" he grimly muttered, moving further from the coach, only to stop short as a faint, uncertain groan came tremblingly to his keen ears.

From which direction had the sound come? That query he could not answer at once, for the sound had seemed to float on the air, as much overhead as from any more reasonable quarter.

"Who calls?" he ventured, in guarded tones, crouching close beside a rough boulder with pistol ready for use in case an enemy should be attracted by the sounds. "Who needs help? Speak out at once!"

Again the groan sounded, and this time he recognized the direction from whence it came, and as he cautiously crept forward, still uncertain whether or no it was a cunning trap to be sprung by the train-robbers, he presently caught sight of a human figure lying on the ground.

Even as he gazed that head was lifted from the earth, the torso supported by its arms, the face turned toward the coaches. And as a ray of light seemed to reach the spot, Major Magnet gave vent to a low exclamation of mingled relief and fear—for his keen eyes recognized in this seemingly dying person none other than Creed Ashmole!

"I'm a friend—hold your hush, man!" came guardedly from his lips as he sprung forward and knelt beside the faintly groaning man. "Where is she—Miss Bryer? They haven't got her? Speak, man!"

"I couldn't—I fought—save her!" gasped Ashmole, his head drooping, saved only from striking the earth by those swift hands.

"Which way did they take her?" urged Major Magnet, but there was no answer, and for a single breath he believed that the young man was dead or dying.

Just then he heard the sound of voices and heavy footsteps in the direction of the cars, and a backward glance gave him a glimpse of several dark, phantom-like figures moving in that direction. And trusting to the darker background of the hill to cover his movements, he picked Ashmole up in his arms and hurried away, seeking a covert in which he might restore the young man to consciousness and learn more definite tidings of Rose Bryer.

Before he had gone half a dozen rods further, he caught the distant notes of a human voice—of a woman, shrieking in terror—the voice of the fair maiden whose fate so deeply interested him, he felt sure.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALUE OF KEEN EARS.

ONLY for an instant; then the shriek was cut short as though a strong hand had been clasped over the woman's lips, and all was still.

Major Magnet dropped the body of Creed Ashmole to the ground and gave a pantherish leap in the direction from whence he felt fairly sure that wild appeal had come, pausing again in hopes of hearing still other sounds to guide him in his further actions. But in vain. The only sound that came to his ears in that moment was a faint cry from the lips of the man whom he had dropped so abruptly.

The major hesitated which course to pursue, glancing back to see Ashmole staggering to his feet. That decided him, and he turned about in hopes of learning more, when Ashmole faintly, huskily gasped:

"Save her—my love! Don't let—ah—"

His hands went up to clasp his brows, and before Major Magnet could regain his side to

break his fall, the tall form sunk in a limp and inert heap, like that of one dead or dying.

Not dead, for his breath was distinctly audible, harsh and stertorous, like that of one whose brain is dangerously oppressed. He muttered something as the major lifted his head, but the words were inarticulate even to those anxiously strained ears.

It seemed barbarous to leave him in such a state, but Major Magnet could think only of that poor, friendless maiden lost in the dark night or at the mercy of the evil gang whose hearts knew no pity.

"Better him than her, and I can't help him any with those curs smelling around after my trail!" flashed through his brain in part apology as he gently lowered the head and turned away in the direction from whence that appealing cry had come.

But was he so certain? The doubt assailed him before he had covered half a hundred yards, and he stopped short in dismay, for once in his life feeling a strange lack of confidence in himself.

"I was fooled in that first groan, and why not in this?" he muttered, uneasily, bending his head and straining his unusual powers of hearing in hopes of catching a sound to guide him more certainly.

A sound came, but though it was startling enough, it was not what he was listening and longing for. A sharp, clear whistle rose on the night air from some point between his present position and the cars, and turning swiftly about he gazed keenly in that direction, a hand on his pistol, for his first thought was that one of the Muck-a-mucks must have discovered him and was calling others to the task of avenging the death of their fellow desperado.

He saw a tall figure rise from the ground, brought into relief against the lighted coaches beyond, and his breath came sharply as he recognized the shape of Creed Ashmole!

Where now was that dizzy, sickening faintness? Where now the weakness which seemed but the shadow of swiftly approaching death?

"Tarred with the same stick, or I'm 'way off my base!" muttered the major, as he saw how easily the man he was watching moved through the night.

He kept him in view by moving in the same direction, thus holding the figure against the lighted windows beyond and below, but he had not far to go. The figure paused, repeating that signal with a louder note, to have it promptly answered from some little distance nearer the divided track.

"If it is indeed that villain, I'll learn more by dogging him than by searching aimlessly through the rocks!" flashed through his excited brain.

With a man of his mettle, to think was to act, and crouching low down, slouching his hat and shrugging his shoulders, the better to guard against his face betraying him by its contrast to the gloom, Major Magnet silently stole nearer to where that tall figure was standing, waiting for the arrival of the one who had answered his signal.

"Who is it, anyway?" came a sharp, suspicious voice from beyond. "I know the signal, but show up, or I'll pull trigger, pardner!"

"It's all right," was the impatient response, and a curious thrill ran over the frame of the eavesdropper, as he fancied, right or wrong, that he recognized the tones of Creed Ashmole. "I'll come to you, since you're so mighty scary. See—my hands are up and empty!"

"That's all right, an' I know you now, but fu'st off—Waal, they's the devil on ten wheels loose in the dark, an' how'd I know but you was him, playin' a rig on a critter?"

"I know. You mean that demon, Major Magnet, as he calls himself. I've just parted from him, and—"

Despite his mingled rage and hatred at the discovery he had just made, Major Magnet could not keep from smiling at the low cry of fear which broke from the lips of the genuine Muck-a-muck at that announcement. Thanks to the lights beyond, he could see the fellow crouch and shrink back, glancing about him in evident dread at that title.

"He's gone—looking for the girl, curse him!" gratefully uttered Ashmole.

"Then you didn't—she hain't slipped clean through your fingers, boss?" eagerly spluttered the outlaw. "Good Lawd! the High Muck-a-muck 'll be jest runnin' over 'th mad, when he comes to hear it!"

"I only hope he'll empty the skull of the clumsy ass who let her slip him, even after I flung her right into his arms!" growled Ashmole, in utter disgust; then, lowering his voice as he cast a hasty glance about them. "I heard her yelp out a bit ago, and I reckon some of the gang has caught her. That demon heard the same sound, and dropped me like a bot potato, to start off in quest of her. If he comes up with those who have her in charge—well, I'd beg to be excused!"

The Muck-a-muck uttered something which the listener but imperfectly caught, and though the risk was great, he crawled still nearer, despite the fact that of cover there was now none save the darkness.

"I know enough of him to feel justified in saying this much," he distinctly caught, Ashmole now speaking. "If your chief is wise, he'll make sure of the girl and let all the rest slide. Tell him I say so. Tell him that the devil's afoot, with blood in his eye!"

"Durned ef I keer to come under its range ag'in, blood or no blood—unless I kin git a dead sure drop onto him from kiver!" grimly laughed the Muck-a-muck, moving rapidly away in the direction of the Mail and Express car, leaving Ashmole alone.

Major Magnet rose to his feet as though he meant to leap upon the crafty traitor, but if such was his intention, he failed to carry it out, for Ashmole abruptly strode away toward the passenger-coaches.

"Go your way for now, you treacherous cur!" muttered Major Magnet, following his movements for a brief space, clicking his teeth sharply as he saw the schemer sink to the ground as though still bent on playing the part of a sorely-injured man. "I'll see you later. And if harm comes to that little woman through your evil plotting, I'll strip your hide from neck to heels!"

With only the memory of that broken shriek to guide him, Major Magnet set off in quest of the maiden whose lovely face had so strongly interested him.

It seemed a forlorn hope, at best, yet he did not entirely despair of success.

"If they have found her, I'll know as much when they come together to beat a retreat, and if I can't tackle the whole outfit at once, I'll wear my feet to their ankles but I'll keep on the trail. And if she's still lost in these infernal rocks, I'm just as apt to stumble across her as another."

He kept doggedly on in the direction which he had first decided upon, and the keenness of his ears was proven in the fact that he actually entered the very pocket from which Rose Bryer had emerged to fall into the hands of the outlaw.

From this point the major made a wide semicircle, using his ears even more than his eyes, for though the moon gave signs of rising, its light was confined to the heavens above as yet.

He had completed more than a fourth of the circuit proposed, when he paused short, his gaze fixed on a clump of stunted trees and dense undergrowth just visible over the back of a little ridge before him.

"It looks light reflected—Ha!"

The faint clink of iron or steel against a rock came to his ears, and crouching low down he moved silently forward, every sense upon the alert. For he felt almost assured that sound came from the stamping hoof of an iron-shod horse, in or from the other side of that same bit of timber.

He had taken but a few steps more when he heard the swish of stiff limbs or bushes, then the rapid pounding of a horse's hoofs at full speed, passing further away from his position, until they were lost to hearing amid a sudden burst of firing in the direction of the Mail and Express car.

"It's a fire, right enough," he muttered, pausing to decide on his wisest course, his keen eyes noting the faint glow reflected from the higher foliage. "The place where the Muck-a-mucks waited for the coming of the train, no doubt. But—is she there?"

It seemed hardly probable, for as he listened not a sound further came from the covert, and it seemed wholly deserted after the departure of that single reckless rider.

"Whoever that was don't place a very high price on his neck, anyway," was his grim reflection as he once more resumed his advance. "I reckon he knows the Old Boy has a mortgage on it, though!"

Although more than half-sure the covert was now deserted, Major Magnet did not relax the caution with which he had begun his approach, too wise to take aught for granted while in the enemy's country, and in a few moments more he found cause to congratulate himself on his prudence.

A faint sound, followed by the trampling of a horse, then a low, impatient growl such as a man might use in chiding a restless animal.

"There's one varmint, anyway, and maybe I can squeeze the truth out of him, if I play the right tune with my fingers," reflected the major as he crept toward the cover, gently, noiselessly parting the bushes to afford a passage for his body.

The better to accomplish this without alarming whoever might happen to be in the timber, he sunk flat to the ground, creeping forward as skillfully as an Indian, removing all twigs and obstacles from his path by which his advance might be betrayed.

Not even a rustle told of his coming until after his head and shoulders were cautiously thrust under the last bush that barred his way into the little opening where the embers of a large fire glowed with a dull red light.

His eyes sparkled with fire as he saw the figure of a woman seated on horseback, her left side toward him, her face, wondrously beautiful despite its pallor, lit up by that dull glow with sufficient distinctness for him to recognize the maiden for whom he was searching.

Fair and welcome though that vision was to his eyes, Major Magnet gave it but the single glance just then, turning his eyes swiftly to sweep the little glade and sum up the odds he must encounter in order to complete the rescue which he had vowed to bring about.

He could scarcely believe his good fortune when he saw but a single man on guard, and in his eager joy at the favorable prospect he forgot his caution so far as to snap a twig as he rose and leaped forward, felling the Muck-a-muck with one sharp stroke of his revolver.

And with a low, gasping cry of terror, Rose Bryer struck her frightened horse sharply with hand and heel, plunging swiftly away in flight!

CHAPTER IX.

A SPUNKY LITTLE FIREFLY.

"HE'LL be as good as his word, will Tom, sir," said Dan Keithwood in low, far from steady tones as he sought in vain for any signs of relenting or mercy from that quarter.

"And I'll be good as mine," was the mocking response. "If the stubborn rascal hurts either you or your mate, I'll toast him over a slow fire just as soon as he's turned over his keys to us."

"Hape o' good that same'll do the loikes av us, d'y moind, now!" groaned Patsy Brannigan, but with a touch of hot indignation in his honest blue eyes. "Weedy's no liar—av he ownly wor, this noight!"

Only a thought of "Lizzie and the kids" kept Dan Keithwood from whirling the heavy ax around to bury its blade in what lay behind that grim mask. And that same thought led him to make one more appeal to the resolute Express messenger and his backers, the mail clerks.

"Tom—boys—you know I wouldn't play the baby if there was even the ghost of a show to make connections; but there isn't. The whole gang is here, and that's big enough to carry off the car if they can't get at the inside any easier."

"We'll play the tune for them to keep step by, then!"

"That isn't Devil Dan talking out there; he was never known to lose his nerve!"

These words came from one of the mail clerks; and the bronzed face of the veteran engineer flushed hotly at the sneer, but he was playing for more than his own life, and again addressed the messenger:

"They swear to butcher us both if we don't break down the door, Tom, and I reckon they'll keep their oath. You're single, but I've got a family depending on my single arm. It isn't a very heavy run, Tom, and you've done enough already for any one man—even the old man couldn't give you your time for yielding to a gang as strong as this."

"It isn't the old man, nor the amount of money, Keithwood, but the oath I took to do my duty while breath lasted."

"I'll make the money loss good if I have to crawl on my knees from door to door to beg it from the charitable, Weeden."

There came no reply, but that silence was a refusal even more significant than could have been shaped in words.

Keithwood turned once more to the High Muck-a-muck, his voice calm with the greatness of his despair.

"I've done my level best. You heard what he said. Tom Weeden will defend his charge against any and every odds, and he'd kill us without mercy if we tried to batter down that door!"

"And I'll kill you if you don't make the attempt!" flashed the head train-robbler, pistol in hand.

"Ye won't shoot, Weedy—ye're ownly blatherin'!" cried Patsy Brannigan as a forlorn hope.

"Sure, the devils'll make us do it!"

"I'd shoot my own father if he tried to break in here," came the cold, steady answer, and with it vanished the last faint hope of the two unfortunate prisoners.

"That ends the palaver; now get down to your work, gentlemen!" the High Muck-a-muck cried, his revolvers covering them as though he had the power to read the mad, desperate thoughts which crowded their brain.

The same fierce impulse was upon them both, and only for that sudden precaution the end of that head rascal would have come right speedily. As it was, both Keithwood and Brannigan knew that before their arms could swing and strike with those keen weapons, Captain Junius could and would shoot to kill.

"Get to work, do you hear?" repeated the chief, his shrill notes growing more vicious with the delay. "Let the bull-headed fool shoot if he will, there's a chance for him to miss you, while I never waste a cartridge."

With a swift glance at each other, the two men dropped the axes and folded their arms over their quickly throbbing hearts, Dan Keithwood steadily saying:

"All right. If we've got to die, we'll die white to the last!"

"You refuse to do what I order?"

"Tom swears he'll kill us if we try it on, and you can't do more than that if we refuse."

The last word had hardly crossed his lips be-

fore those weapons exploded, almost together, and the two men staggered back.

Not in death, but with a sensation as of a red-hot iron sweeping across a cheek to pierce an ear, while the flame and smoke temporarily blinded them.

"Last call!" rung out the sharp voice of Captain Junius, as a motion sent his men to grasp the half-stunned prisoners. "Will you play cat to our monkey?"

"It's more loike a pig—with a bit out av me ear!" spluttered Patsy, losing all fear in his hot rage at thus being marked. "Divil a lick will I stroke unless ye give me a chance at the dirty noggin' av ye! An' thin it's niver anither ye'll be beggin' for, I'll go bail!"

Captain Junius strode forward and pressed the muzzle of his pistol fairly against the forehead of the angry fireman, the hammer lifted and his finger on the trigger.

Brannigan flinched at a trifle as the cold metal touched his skin, but then rallied and gazed defiantly into those flaming eyes.

"Shoot, ye cur! I can't die but the wanst, anyway!"

His life hung on a hair, and not one among that evil gang but felt certain his brains would fly to the winds the next instant; but so sudden and painless a doom did not satisfy the enraged chief.

Withdrawing his weapon and starting back a little, he cried:

"Truss'em up, lads, some of you, while the rest start a fire under the car! They shall all roast together, though it be the last act of my life! Lively, for—"

Two shots came in swift succession from the car, and Captain Junius gave an angry start as a bit of lead stung him sharply on one shoulder, though the skin was hardly broken. But the warning was sufficient, and with his men dragging their prisoners along, that position was abandoned for another which would not be so readily commanded by the defenders of the Mail and Express.

With their chief urging them on, the Muck-a-mucks made rapid work of the terrible task assigned them, so far as kindling the fire was concerned. The ends of burning logs were dragged from the big fire and piled under the car at each end, close to the trucks, then fresh fuel was hurriedly cast upon the glowing brands, to shortly ignite and send up forked tongues of yellow flame, licking and blackening the bottom of the stubbornly-defended coach.

"That's plenty!" harshly cried the High Muck-a-muck as he saw this. "Toss these fools in for back-logs, and let their howlings tell their mates inside what they have to expect!"

Even those crime-hardened rascals hesitated to obey, unable to fully credit their ears, and before the infuriated chief could repeat his terrible order, the swift clattering of hoofs came through the night, and Little Firefly dashed up to the spot, shooting out of her saddle as though hurled from it by the sudden stopping of her horse, rather than of her own volition.

"For shame! How dare you be so cruel?" came pantingly from her lips as a little gloved hand struck Captain Junius sharply on one arm that was flung out to arrest her progress. "There are human beings in the car—merciful heavens!"

The ejaculation came with a painful gasp as a couple of shots rung out, the flame-tinged smoke lighting up the barred window briefly.

A fierce oath came from behind that grim mask as the High Muck-a-muck flung an arm about the trim waist of the girl, whirling her so as to hide that sight from her eyes, and there was a curious blending of love with the anger that rung in his voice as he said:

"Why did you come—how dared you break my orders, Firefly?"

The girl quickly rallied from the awful sickness which seemed to overcome her as she realized in full the evil work that was being done by command of him whom she called father.

"Father—men—are you devils, instead, to stand idly by and witness such an atrocious crime? Let me go—I'll scatter the brands and save those poor fellows if it kills me!"

"It's only to scare them into opening up, little fool!" growled the chief, holding her powerless, despite her frantic efforts to break away.

"They'll cave in good time, be sure of that."

Little Firefly suddenly ceased her struggles, like one convinced that her alarm had been without full foundation, and her father added in a tone of visible relief:

"Go back and wait, as I bade you, Firefly. This is no place for such as you, and I was an infernal fool for letting you come."

"You promised me that no great harm should be done. You swore that unless you could accomplish your ends without shedding blood, you would give over and turn away to wait for a better chance."

"I meant all I said, too, but—"

"Men!" flashed Little Firefly, turning her head as she spoke; "Put out that fire! Go—I command you!"

Though Captain Junius said no word in denial, not one of the Muck-a-mucks made a move toward obeying the girl. Whatever their senti-

ments toward her, their dread of the chief was still more potent.

With a swift, desperate effort Little Firefly broke away from the arms of her father, his grasp having relaxed as her struggles ceased.

"Back!" she cried, drawing a revolver and turning the muzzle toward her own temple as Captain Junius started to catch her again. "As heaven records my oath, I'll fire if you dare touch me again while the poor fellows in yonder car are in peril!"

"Don't—Little Firefly!" hoarsely gasped the startled chief, recoiling with a hand uplifted.

"Order your devils to put out those fires, father," her voice cold and steady though her dark eyes seemed flaming. "Quick! hesitate and see your child fall dead at your feet! I swear it, by mother's grave!"

"Go—do as she says, men," the outlaw commanded, his voice so altered that his men would never have recognized it had they not seen his gesture in confirmation.

They sprung forward, eager enough to obey it, seemed. Crime-stained and hardened though they were by a life of lawlessness, they were not anxious to have a share of such an atrocious deed on their souls.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the chief, with forced calmness, but not daring to approach his daughter as long as that deadly weapon was held against her white temple. "Put down your gun, Firefly. If it should go off—"

"It would not inflict near so awful a wound as my poor heart has already received, father," came the broken, grieved response. "You swore to me—you said there should be no lives taken and—"

"It was their own fault. Why must they hold out so recklessly?"

"Go—go help them make sure! If any mistake should be made, even now, I'll never live to see the sun rise again. I could not, knowing that my father was—a murderer!"

Captain Junius hesitated for a moment; then he turned and hurried down to where his men were scattering the blazing brands and whipping out the few streaks of light that marked where the bottom of the car had already caught fire.

Not a word was uttered by either himself or his men. They were curiously awed by his silence, and hardly one among their number but dreaded what was yet to come.

Would even Little Firefly escape without harm?

CHAPTER X.

FOILED AT ALL POINTS.

NOT until Captain Junius had fairly reached the car and joined his men at work extinguishing the fires, did Little Firefly lower that weapon from her temple, but when it did drop to her side, with it went all outward emotion save that of hot anger as she flashed an angry look upon the two men still standing near.

"Why are you skulking, you wretches?" she cried, boldly advancing, to recoil a bit as Dan Keithwood made reply:

"If you look at our hands and feet, miss, you'll see the answer."

"An' divil a bit w'd ye be seem' us this long av it worn't fer thim same—bad luck to them same knots!" growled Patsy Brannigan, pitching heavily forward on his knees then rolling over on his side, the consequence of his attempting to take a step in his hampered condition. "Av ye'll jist lind us the loan av a knife, mum, we'll make up fer sthoppin' be pullin' her woide opin an'—"

"Don't ask too much, Patsy," interposed Keithwood, not daring to press their good fortune too hard at first. "We already owe you our lives, lady, and if I get clear this night, there'll be Lizzie and the kids praying for you, night and day."

"You don't think—it was only to frighten the guards into opening up the car," faltered Little Firefly.

"An' him biddin' the imps pitch the both o' us in the foire box to make more st'ame wid the fat o' us?" indignantly spluttered Patsy, wholly ignoring the muttered caution from the lips of his mate. "Fricken be—av ye say so, mum!" at last taking the hint and smothering his resentment.

"I can't think that, but I promise you now that neither of you shall be harmed further," hurriedly declared Little Firefly, noticing the return of Captain Junius and his men.

"Are you satisfied, now?" the chief asked, his voice low and seemingly shaken, as he drew near to where the girl stood by the side of Dan Keithwood.

"I will be, when you pass your word of honor that neither of these two poor fellows shall be harmed, father," steadily replied Little Firefly, one hand lightly touching the arm of the engineer.

"Will you mount your horse and ride back to where I left you?"

"I'd much rather stay with you, father," and her hand moved to his arm instead, her dark eyes gazing up into his, the only feature visible with that grim mask covering his face.

"Because you doubt me?"

"Because I'd rather share your fate, be that

for good or evil," came softly from her lips as she drew him away from the spot, speaking again when no other ears were nigh enough to catch her words: "Father, I beg of you to abandon this evil work and go home with me. It can bring us no good in the end, even should you fully succeed in your plans."

"Succeed!" with a short, bitter laugh that sounded far more like a curse. "We've been foiled from start to finish, yet you ask me to give over and slink away like a sheep-killing cur at the dawn of day! If ever I'm idiot enough to let you coax me into taking you on another raid, Firefly, may the foul fiend—"

A little hand closed over the slit in his mask, turning the vow into an inarticulate growl.

One of the Muck-a-mucks was drawing near, and Captain Junius turned toward him with the harsh demand:

"What now?"

"That engineer feller begged me to say that it was time a freight was due, an' ef they wasn't no flag or light put out, they'd be a turrible smash-up, sir, boss."

"That's not our lookout. Let the train hands attend to it."

But, Little Firefly was not content with that, and springing swiftly back to where the two men were helpless, she cut their bonds and bade the Muck-a-mucks let them go free under penalty of her anger.

Captain Junius had followed her, but he stood in moody silence while she acted, never interfering even when the two men hastened away from the spot, toward the coaches to the rear.

Not a sound had come from the Mail and Express after those shots which had so narrowly missed snuffing the light of the High Muck-a-muck. Evidently the defenders were waiting to see what would turn up next, content to remain inactive as long as the enemy would permit.

Little Firefly was about to renew her pleading with her father, when the coming of a masked figure from the direction of the passenger coaches led her to pause, for he seemed in great haste or moving under great excitement.

"What is it?" demanded the chief, advancing to meet him.

"Heap wuss news than I like to fetch, boss, but somebody hed to do it, an' so—"

"Out with it, in a word if you can!" growled Captain Junius.

"One man dead, an' the gal missin'!"

As he blurted out the news, the burly fellow visibly shrunk, like one who rather more than half expected to receive a blow or shot for bringing such evil tidings, but to his delight the chief stood quiet, seemingly unshaken by the announcement.

"Who killed him?"

"Major Magnet, they say, but ef he didn't, it come 'long o' his durn bullheadedness. Ye see, boss, the way of it was like this. When the boys as was takin' up the c'lection, ye know, got to whar the major was sittin', waitin' his turn as they nat'ally thought, why he jest up an'—"

"Never mind that part," with a sidelong glance toward Little Firefly who had followed his footsteps and stood listening to the prolix speech of the Muck-a-muck. "What of the girl? How came she to be missing? Wasn't she on the train?"

"Safe enough, boss, an' at fu'st everything worked to the queen's taste. Ashmole hed her under his wing, an' when he played skeered an' made a break for the hind end o' the car, Jim let him slip by, jest as was 'ranged aforehand. But then—waal, I didn't wait to git the hull p'tick'lars, fer I reckoned you ort to be posted, boss, but somehow the gal give 'em the slip an' scooted for the hill. The boys is huntin' for her now, an' I reckon they'll hev her roped in by this time."

Captain Junius flung up his right hand and seemed on the point of bursting into a storm of cursing, when Little Firefly moved forward and touched his shoulder, speaking swiftly:

"Is it Miss Rose Bryer you are talking about, father?"

"What do you know about it?" flashed the chief, his arm dropping to his side as he turned to face the speaker.

"Have you forgotten what you told me? That it was a love case, where a bard-hearted father—"

"I know that, but there's no time to waste in idle talk. The girl must be found, if it takes a month!"

"She is found, father," laughed Little Firefly, softly, glad that she could give him this one consolation, hoping that after her news he would be more content to take saddle and ride away to their mountain home. "I forgot to tell you that, when I saw—when I joined you a bit ago. She is at the camp now, under guard of Jackson."

"You are sure? There can be no mistake?"

"She answered to the name when I called her Miss Rose Bryer, and before leaving I warned Jackson to keep both eyes open, for I'd do something awful to him if he let her slip through his fingers," laughed Little Firefly, her musical notes ringing out clearly, almost joyously, as she saw the pleasure her words gave her father.

"I hearn some o' the boys talkin' 'bout how the corndoctor an' the nigger porter got away, boss. They kinder reckoned mebbe they'd run off to ketch a telegraph wire or some sech thing; anyway, they talked like they was gittin' kinder oneasy over somethin'," ventured the bearer of evil tidings, emboldened by his immunity from harm thus far.

He shrunk hastily back as Captain Junius flung a sullen growl at his head, then turned to where Little Firefly's horse awaited her return, a single toss of his sinewy arms sending her into the saddle.

"We'll go take a look at this prize of yours, Firefly," he said, a hand on the reins as he led the way toward the distant camp.

"And when you see her, you'll let the rest go, dear?" the maiden asked, coaxingly. "I never thought it could be so terrible! I never thought such things *could* be, even though—father, tell me that you were not in earnest when you swore those poor men should perish in the ruins of that car!"

"Can you think me such an inhuman monster, Flo?" with a low, soft laugh as he glanced up into her pale, anxious face. "All I intended was to give them a thorough scare. Even if you hadn't come, I would have put out the flames in time to save them, though in doing so I had to lose my own hands by burning them to a crisp."

"I'm glad—so glad!" sighed the girl, her face lightening up once more. "I never knew you were such an accomplished actor, father. Why, even I for a little while deemed you in terrible earnest!"

"I had to be so, for those rascals were watching and listening, don't you see?" laughed Captain Junius, but quickening his pace as though this close questioning was growing dangerous.

A very brief period sufficed to carry them to the vicinity of the camp, but there came no answer to the shrill signal which the chief uttered, and with a muttered growl that speedily broke into fierce imprecations, he sprang through the bushes and into the opening.

Only a dark figure lay on the ground, seemingly dead.

Springing to the side of this, the High Muck-a-muck tore off his mask, revealing a rough, ghastly looking countenance, streaked with blood that still trickled from a severe wound near the top of his skull. It was the face of Jackson, the outlaw left in charge of Rose Bryer.

Used as she must have been to rough life and wild scenes, even Little Firefly shrunk away from her father during those first moments, so furious were his oaths, so hot his rage and chagrin at this fresh defeat. And though Captain Junius loved the girl as much as a man of his nature could love, perhaps it was just as well that Little Firefly did keep out of his reach just then.

The firelight was to dim by this time to reveal the trail of the man whose strong arm had lain this outlaw low, or to show the tracks made by the frightened horse as it sped away with its fair burden. Even if he had looked for these, the chief could hardly have distinguished them from the many others which cut up the bit of soft ground around the camp-fire.

The only clew left was that grim figure, and though life had not fled, Jackson was unconscious and beyond the power of talking, just then.

Without seeming to notice Little Firefly, Captain Junius left the covert and rapidly hastened down to the passenger coaches, making no answer to the greetings from his men whom he met on the way. He sprang upon the platform between the two coaches, dashing open the doors and harshly calling out:

"The circus is over, ladies and gents! We've finished with you, and in return for your kind contributions I just mention that you'd better keep an eye open for the Fast Freight, which is just due here. If it should try to pass by climbing over your train, it might scare the more timid among you—that's all!"

He sprang to the ground and hastily gathered his men by his signal, bidding them to horse without delay.

CHAPTER XI.

FLEEING FROM A FIEND.

ROSE BRYER caught a glimpse of that figure creeping through the bushes into the little opening, even before the twig which cracked sharply at Major Magnet's passage, but until that sound she failed to recognize the human shape.

She saw that figure suddenly rise to its feet with a gleaming weapon in its hand, crouching like a panther for its leap, and in her wild terror she strove to cry aloud.

The ruddy light from the dying camp-fire fell athwart that face, and what was meant by Major Magnet to reassure the poor girl, actually increased her fright.

To her eyes his face was that of a very fiend, smeared with blood that seemed still fresh, and the glance that showed her this was far too brief to enable her to recognize the friend who wore that unconscious mask.

She also misinterpreted the gesture which was meant to insure her silence until the rescuer could reach her guard, and as this fresh object

of terror bounded forward, her eyes closed and her heart sickened within her.

She heard a dull, ugly thud, and there came a jerk on the bridle that caused her to sway in her seat and the horse to snort with fright as it sprang to one side.

Almost without thought she urged the animal forward with hand and heel, never once looking toward those two figures on the ground, never catching aught of the sharp, eager cry which was sent after her.

With another frightened snort the horse plunged through the bushes and out of the firelight, the stiff branches almost tearing Rose from the saddle, making such a noise that even if her wits had been cool and clear, she could hardly have heard, much less recognized that appeal.

Clinging to the pommel with one hand, she brushed the torn veil from her eyes with the other, steadying herself in the saddle though she made no effort to check the dangerous speed of her mount as yet.

She was just beginning to realize that she had escaped her enemies, but her brain was still confused, her wits still benumbed, and in the curious ringing in her ears she fancied she caught the sounds of fierce and deadly pursuit.

The animal trod on a loose stone, pitching forward and only saving itself by a furious scramble. Rose was almost unseated, and would have been quite so, only for that tenacious grip on the curved pommel.

If anything, this shock did her good, for as soon as the frightened horse regained its balance, she tightened the reins, lending it needed support even while striving to moderate its break-neck pace. This was no easy task, for the creature had been thoroughly scared and was naturally hard-mouthed, but as the swift motion through the cool, fresh air revived her, Rose called both hands into play and aided by the strong curb, soon gained a partial victory.

Not until then did Rose dare turn her head for a backward glance to see how closely she was being pursued, and when she did so now, that ghastly face—white as a corpse, save where the hideous red marked it in blotches—seemed multiplied into a score, dancing and floating through the air, as though all the spirits of evil had taken part against her this awful night.

The very horror of that fantastical fancy wrought its cure, and as the hunted maiden brushed a hand across her eyes, those spectral faces vanished and all seemed harmless behind her, so far as the eye or ear could testify.

A breath of prayerful relief parted her lips, and Rose turned her eyes to the front, to wrench up her horse with almost superhuman power, a gasping ejaculation of horror greeting the scene which lay spread before her.

Brief though the moments since her breaking away from the little opening, they were long enough for the frightened steed to bear its fair rider to a little rise overlooking the attack on the Mail and Express by Captain Junius and his lawless gang of Muck-a-mucks.

Pale as death, her dark eyes distended, her breath coming in short and painful gasps, Rose Bryer took in the full horror of that scene, for the moment spellbound and stricken dumb.

Under the car, and near the tracks at each end, blazed a fire, the tongues of flame already seeming fastened to the wood-work above. And outlined against this ruddy glare were half a score human figures.

A moment later Rose recognized the figure of Little Firefly as she broke from the arms of her father and kept him from again seizing her by threatening to take her own life.

She saw the daring girl pointing toward the growing fires with her unarmed hand, and could even catch a word or two as Little Firefly demanded the lives of the imprisoned messenger and mail clerks under penalty of killing herself.

"And they—they want me, too!" panted the young woman, as a fresh spasm of terror assailed her.

The actions of Little Firefly, the few words of her speech which reached her ears, together with the attempt to set the car on fire, told Rose how thoroughly evil were her enemies, and she felt that she would far rather perish outright than to fall again into the power of such cruel criminals.

Wrenching the head of her horse around at a sharp angle, she urged him on with husky voice, with nervous heel, with doubled reins swiftly lashing his neck on either side as her supple wrist played back and forth. With a snort the animal plunged ahead, scattering the loose stones with its iron-shod hoofs, but Rose Bryer was too completely under the spell of horror to take note of the noise which might well betray her into the very hands from which she was fleeing.

Only for the fact that just then Captain Julius yielded to the demands of his daughter, sending his men to scatter the blazing brands which threatened the car defenders with the most frightful of deaths, that wild flight must have been heard and investigated by the outlaws. As it was, the poor girl escaped that peril.

She made no effort to guide her horse. Her head was bowed, her eyes closed, and she even sought to deaden her sense of hearing lest the

dying screams of the tortured men smite upon her brain.

It was well that the mount given her by Little Firefly was a more than ordinarily sure-footed one, for the slope was thickly strewn with loose stones, and more than once only its cat-like quickness prevented a dangerous fall. It received no support, no aid from its fair rider. Her sole wish was to leave that terrifying scene far behind her as quickly as possible, and she still swung the doubled reins back and forth, though the horse was already doing its level best.

How long this lasted or how far that mad flight carried her before the inevitable happened, Rose Bryer never realized. All at once she felt herself falling, but whether through the horse shying or by a stumble, she never knew.

All she could recall was an instinctive effort to save herself and alight upon her feet, then a heavy shock that deprived her of all recollection.

The next she realized was hearing her own voice uttering a faint cry of pain, then the pain itself that turned her sick and sent her poor brain to whirling again.

She felt herself falling, and dew-damp leaves brushed her cheek as her head sunk forward. There was no shock of moment, and she dimly realized that her fall was only from a partially erect position, to which she had risen before her senses were fairly awakened.

The cool, fresh leaves against which her face rested served to restore her senses, but her strength seemed gone and she could only lie as she had fallen, staring blankly into the gloom, here seeming more dense than any she had that night experienced.

Where was she? What had happened? Why was she feeling so weak, so curiously helpless?

She seemed to feel the dizzy swaying of the cars on which she had journeyed so long and so far, but there was only a low, sleepy hum in her ears instead of the noisy rattle and regular pounding of the wheels over the joints. And then, like one in a dream she began to pick up the broken threads, to live over again in memory the thrilling events of that never-to-be-forgotten night.

She recalled that sudden shock as the powerful air-brakes brought the train to a standstill in obedience to the danger-signal swung by Captain Junius. She heard the spiteful sound of the bullets cutting tiny holes through the windows, and she saw the pulverized glass glittering like hoar frost in the lamplight. Then—

A gasping moan parted her lips, and she strove to spring to her feet, with that awful horror once more taking full-possession of her brain, only to find herself helpless even to cry aloud for mercy.

It had all come back to her now.

The attack on the coach, the ugly masks of the outlaws, their harsh threats; the hurried words of Creed Ashmole, before he so daringly run the gantlet with her in his arms. And then—

"Was it his voice I heard? Was he in league with those frightful beings?"

Strange, now that doubt haunted her, even while she began to believe that she must perish here, unable to help herself, crippled beyond recovery, and with never a friend near to receive her parting words, to carry her last prayer to the father who must be, even then, impatiently looking and longing for her arrival!

Her eyes closed with a shiver as she recalled that loved face as she had last seen it. How would hers be when his tear-dimmed eyes should rest upon it.

"It will kill him! Father, I must not, will not perish thus!"

Desperately she fought back that deathly stupor, trying to clear her sadly confused brain, to gather strength and nerve sufficient to learn the very worst she had to fear. And as she so fought, that dull, misty cloud seemed to fade and recede from before her eyes. The floating pain passed down to center in one leg; lower still, until it paused near her ankle.

Yet the poor girl hesitated to make another trial, lest it confirm those first frightful forebodings, and she lay motionless while gathering her courage for the test.

Almost involuntarily she moved an arm, cramped by her awkward position, and as the hot blood began prickling through it afresh, her spirits took an upward leap, and a sobbing cry came to her lips. If she could lift an arm, matters might not be nearly so bad as she feared.

The thought lent her courage to make a further effort, and slowly, guardedly she rose to a sitting position, without any severe pain following the attempt.

The pain in her ankle grew sharper, but it seemed to draw it all from the rest of her person, and Rose began to realize the glad truth: her dreaded paralysis was but the benumbing effects of her fall from the saddle, and it was already passing away.

She grasped the stem of a bush close beside her, the spreading top of which had shut out the growing light of the rising moon until then, and painfully rose erect, though a sharp twinge of pain in her right ankle drew a short, sharp cry from her lips.

The sound frightened her, for it recalled those evil outlaws to her memory, and she cast a fearful glance around her, lest her cry had reached unfriendly ears.

To shriek aloud with terror as she caught sight of a dark figure rapidly approaching.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAJOR SCORES A POINT.

WHEN Major Magnet caught sight of Rose Bryer gazing toward him as he crept into the opening where she sat her horse under charge of the Muck-a-muck, he never for an instant doubted that she recognized him as a friend and rescuer, though he made a reassuring gesture just as he sprung forward with clubbed revolver.

Perhaps it was well for him that his first stroke was as sure as it was swift, else the unexpected flight of the maiden whom he had inwardly vowed to save from her enemies at whatever cost, might have enabled Jackson to turn the tables on him.

As he struck, the major gripped the outlaw with his other hand, to cut off all outcry, and both men fell headlong to the ground. Only for this, the major might have caught the frightened horse before it could pass beyond reach.

As it was his friendly cry was unheard or unheeded, and when he regained his feet, the terrified fugitive had fairly cleared the timber and was dashing at a dangerous pace away through the night.

"What's gone with my luck to-night?" he growled almost viciously as he tore through the bushes and sprung into the open, flashing a keen glance around in quest of the maiden. "Must everything go crooked?"

He could see nothing, for swift as had been his movements, that headlong flight had covered considerable ground, and the gloom fell like a curtain between him and the maiden for whose safety he felt so powerful an interest. But his ears served him better, and he darted off in the direction from whence came the trampling of hoofs, though he lost the sound almost as soon, what with the fugitive striking a softer track of ground and the noise his own running made over the rocks.

He kept the direction, however, though ignorant of the fact that at its first awkward stumble the horse veered sharply to the left, heading more directly toward the spot where Captain Junius was even then dooming the messenger and his fellow defenders to a hideous death.

That ignorance, however, proved of great value, since the direction the major took carried him in sight of the fires beyond at a point which brought Rose Bryer and her horse into full relief against the red light.

"Thank heaven! she's safe so far!" fervently muttered the major as he caught sight of the maiden, spellbound by that thrilling spectacle. "If she don't dart off again at the sound of my voice!"

This fear was realized even before it could be fully expressed, for overcome by horror, the poor girl whipped her steed into reckless flight, cutting across the course thus far followed by the major, paying no attention to the warning cry with which he sought to check her.

If her eyes had not been closed to shut out that awful sight from which she was fleeing, Rose must have seen him as he ran with pantherish activity to intercept her flight, and though he saw that she must be nearly crazed with fear, the major marveled that she failed to take notice of his friendly call.

Swift as he was, the horse could cover ground still more rapidly, and while he was yet two-score yards away, the fugitive crossed in front of him, heading for the broken ground beyond, through which such headlong flight could hardly escape a fatal ending.

"If it comes to that, I'll take what pay I can out of Creed Ashmole!" savagely panted Major Magnet, but without in the least slackening his almost superhuman exertions.

After the first few rods he was forced to run by ear, for the gloom swallowed up the horse and rider, but even that keen sense could not be depended upon for long at the rate Rose was fleeing. Then—what could he do?

"God keep an eye of mercy upon the poor child!" came fervently from his lips as he doggedly pressed on at the greatest practicable speed.

That was not great, taking the darkness and the rough ground together, but it was all he could do. More than once he tumbled over a rock or tripped on a tenacious vine, but as often he was up and away, without losing an instant until the sounds of hoof-strokes died out in the distance.

Even then he kept on until he knew he must have at least made up the distance which lay between himself and the fugitive when those guiding sounds were last heard, confident that thus far he had not gone materially astray.

"Not a sound!" he muttered, drawing a long, full breath as he lifted his head from listening intently. "They're down, or else I'm distanced

completely. The last for choice, though, until I find out different—which Heaven forbid!"

It seemed like a forlorn hope, but Major Magnet was not a man to give over while even the ghost of a hope remained, and he once more advanced, sweeping the ground to either side as he zig-zagged along, thus covering more space and guarding as well as possible against passing the maiden by in case she had fallen or been flung from the saddle.

At brief intervals he paused to bend his ear in listening, though he had little hopes of being aided in that shape.

"I don't want to be," he frowned, as the picture of the fair face scarred, the perfect figure crippled, the life ebbing out amid moans of agony, each one more bitter than sudden death. "I'd rather find her a corpse than like that!"

Yet it was his keen sense of hearing, after all, that brought his blind search to an ending, though only after what seemed an eternity of suspense so painful as to almost frighten him, strong man though he was wont to consider himself.

"What's come over me?" he frowned, with an uneasy toss of his head and a long, full breath. "What's she to me, other than any woman in peril? One would almost swear I was in love with the child!"

He caught the sounds of stamping feet, and the metallic clink of iron against flint prepared him for what he speedily found: the horse on which Rose Bryer had taken to flight, but now without a rider, its broken and trailing reins tangled in a scrubby bush.

With painfully throbbing heart the major quickly searched the ground near where the animal stood, fearing the very worst, as no response came to his calls; but his search was fruitless, and knowing that he must have passed by where the actual accident had taken place, he turned back, quartering the ground like a dog searching for birds.

"I'd give a hand to find her safe and uninjured!" he muttered, pausing in the quest and brushing the cold drops that bedewed his brow. "I never thought I'd feel this way over another woman!"

And yet he did not even then know how intensely that fair face had interested him. He only began to realize it when he caught sight of a dark figure lying beside a little clump of bushes, without motion in response to the sharp cry that parted his lips.

He turned sick at heart, his sight dimming, his brain whirling until he leaned against a huge boulder to support his trembling frame. For he felt that he had found her, only to find her claimed by death.

He quickly rallied, and knelt by her side, gently, fearfully passing his hands over her body and limbs, each moment expecting to find the fatal wound, but each moment regaining something of his usual nerve and coolness as he failed in that.

He removed the ulster he had taken from the dead Muck-a-muck and twisting it into a roll, struck a match and set one corner afire, too impatient to lose time in gathering better fuel. And by that uncertain light he renewed his examination with greater calmness, to find that, so far as he could tell, the maiden had received no serious injury.

"The bush saved her—God bless the bush!" he softly uttered, as he noted the broken and disordered branches.

For once in his life Major Magnet regretted the fact that he was a total abstainer, so far as liquor for drinking purposes went.

"And not a drop of water nearer than Roaring Fork—worse luck!" he muttered, as he placed the maiden in a more comfortable position, then trampled out the vile smelling fire by means of which he had made his examination.

"Maybe she'll come around without either—unless there's some internal injury!" with all of his former fears returning.

He felt almost frightened at himself as he felt that wrenching pain at his heart. What could it mean? Surely he was not idiot enough to have fallen in love with this mere child at his age?

"And with what I've set before me, too!" he harshly muttered, his eyes glowing redly through the gloom. "I'm old enough to be her father, so far as years go, and in all else I'm too old to be her great grandfather!"

The impatient trampling of hoofs gave him a start, and broke in upon his painful musings a little later.

His first thought was of the Muck-a-mucks, and his hands sought his ready revolver, but then a sharp neigh told him different. The sounds came from the horse which Rose Bryer had ridden, and which he had left still tangled up in the bushes.

"I've got to put an end to any racket like that, or I'll have the whole evil gang on my shoulders," he muttered, giving a parting look to the still insensible maiden, then reluctantly leaving her. "I can't fight them now—not until I see how the child pulls through!"

He smiled grimly at his choice of a word; he knew that Rose Bryer was far more than a child to him, deny the fact as he might.

He picked his way back to where the horse was

fastened, moving him to a more comfortable spot, hitching him securely yet so that he could crop a mouthful or two of the tender leaves.

"If the little woman comes out all right, she'll need him to make Durango on, for those imps 'll make sure she don't get back to the train without their seeing her," he reflected, giving the animal a soothing touch or two before turning back to where he had left Rose Bryer.

The darkness and the rough nature of the ground gave him no little trouble, and for a time he had actually lost, so far as the spot in which he had left the maiden was concerned. And he was growing seriously uneasy at this enforced delay, when he caught the faint cry which Rose gave at finding herself able to move her limbs.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Bryer!" the major softly uttered as he saw the girl shrink in fear and start to her feet as though bent on flight. "I'm a friend—your father's friend, dear child!"

He saw her sinking, and sprang forward just in time to save her from falling with combined weakness and fright. He felt a strange, delirious temptation to fold her to his bosom and press his burning lips to hers, but he resisted it. The better to do so, he gently placed her in a sitting posture with her back supported by a rock, then drew back a pace with his hands folded behind him, speaking gently, deliberately, divining justly how confused her brain must still be after all she had passed through since the setting of the sun.

"You are frightened, Miss Bryer, and I can't wonder at that. Still, I think I can convince you that I am what I say: a friend who stands ready to defend you against your enemies so long as there is strength in my body to handle a weapon or to deal a blow.

"My name is Major Magnet. I know your father, Keene Bryer, of Animas City, and am proud to call him my friend. I was in the same car with you when those train robbers attacked it, and I followed after in hopes of shielding my friend's child against danger. And I struck down your guard on the hill back of the train, when your horse ran away with you before I could make myself known."

He struck a couple of matches and held them up near his face.

"You saw me in the car: try to remember, try to trust me, child."

"I do—I will! It is the face of an honest man!" she cried.

CHAPTER XIII.

PULLING WOOL OVER THEIR EYES.

"THE proudest title mortal man ever received, Miss Bryer, and I'll never forget that it fell from your lips," earnestly uttered Major Magnet as the match burned to his fingers, then dropped a tiny spark to perish at his feet.

A little too earnestly, it may be, for he saw the maiden visibly shrink before his words or manner of speaking them. Soberly tried as she had been that night, her maidenly timidity had not been blunted in the least.

"I fear you are suffering, Miss Bryer?" he said, driving all emotion other than that of friendly sympathy from his voice, wisely attributing that start and shrink to physical pain.

"It is nothing. Only—those terrible wretches!"

"Have done you all the harm they can while your father's friend and comrade is strong enough to do and to act, child," the major quickly said. "Try and forget them for a little while at least. Try and make sure just how far you are injured by your fall from the saddle, for on that depends the course we must follow to get out of this little tangle, you see, child."

That term came less easy than at first, and Major Magnet involuntarily frowned as he saw how naturally Rose Bryer accepted it. Child as he called her, he would have preferred more argument before being accepted as one in the same class with her actual father.

"I don't think—I'm almost sure there is nothing worse than a sprained ankle," hesitated the maiden, recalling those frightful fears and feelings of but a brief space before. "I did think I was helplessly crippled, and while that fear lasted I suffered more than death; but I was driving it away when your coming startled me."

"For which I meekly beg pardon," laughed the major, once more his old self as he found how much more favorably the affair was panning out than he had dared hope. "It seems I am fated to frighten you by my coming, though you haven't a firmer, more earnest friend in all Colorado than my humble self. If you had only recognized my face back at the little patch of timber, all this painful thought might have been spared you."

Despite the trust and confidence which she was rapidly learning to place in this stranger who claimed to be the friend of her father, Rose Bryer shrank back with an involuntary shiver at those words. They recalled the horrors with which she had watched that ghastly blood-marked face as it caught the dull glow of the camp-fire, though she knew now how greatly her overwrought fancy had exaggerated its disfigurement.

Major Magnet noted that movement, and though he guessed at its origin he deemed it

best to pretend different. He stooped and gently touched the hands of the trembling girl, speaking earnestly:

"I fear you are hurt worse than you care to admit, my poor child. Can't you ever yet make up your mind to trust me? I am old enough to be your father. I am your father's friend. Will not that friend's child believe me when I say that I am anxious to help her and guard her from all pain and peril, just as though she was my own daughter?"

There was something in his tones, in the dimly-seen face which bent over her, in that magnetic touch of his cool, gentle yet powerful hands, that banished all memory of the ghastly vision which had caused her to shrink away, and Rose Bryer smiled faintly through her tears as she spoke:

"You have one—you have a child like me, sir?"

"God knows—I once had!"

The words were hardly articulate, and they sounded as though forced from his lips against his will. And dropping her hands, Major Magnet drew back, turning away to gaze at vacancy for a brief space.

Rose watched him, wondering at the strange effect of her innocent words, but before she could even give a guess at the reason, the major turned again, all trace of emotion banished from face and voice.

"I ask you to trust me, Miss Bryer, because I fear that without your perfect confidence I may not be able to baffle your enemies."

"You mean the—those evil robbers?"

"The Muck-a-mucks of Animas, as they call themselves," with a touch of contempt in his clear, yet guarded tones. "Are you strong enough to bear with me if I talk plainly, Miss Bryer?"

"If there is aught I should know, yes," was the brave reply.

"Give me your hand—so!" and his finger lightly rested over the throbbing vein which betrays so much to the practiced touch. "Better than I dared hope after what you must have gone through this night, my brave child," the major nodded approvingly.

"It is because I have a good and true friend to share those fears and trials, sir," with a low, not wholly forced laugh. "Until I heard your voice and saw your face, I was nearly crazy with terror. Now—I begin to remember what hope is!"

"A very neat compliment, little lady, and when there's more time to spare I'll try and thank you for it," said the major, his own pulse far less steady than that of which he had been feeling, though he permitted nothing of this to show in voice or face. "Just now it is action we need most."

"I trust all to you, dear sir," with simple earnestness, rising to her feet and carefully testing her injured ankle. "I must," with a little laugh in which a sob was poorly concealed. "For I haven't the ghost of an idea where we are, or how to turn in order to regain the train!"

"The last place you ought to think of making, just now," quickly interposed the major. "You said I might speak out plainly?"

"I beg that you will, for I can only be guided by your judgment."

"I'll explain later how I came to make the discovery, little lady, but just now there's only time to tell you that the main, if not only, reason those rascals had in attacking the passenger coaches, was to get you in their clutches. Don't let that frighten you so badly, child," as the maiden shrank away with a gasping cry.

"You are safe from them as long as I can use hands or brain."

"I forgot—please go on."

"So far as I can see just now, there are only two ways open; one is for you to mount the horse that brought you here, and with me as guide, strike through the hills for Durango, the nearest point where you can be sure of safety, so far as those rascals are concerned."

"And the other plan?"

"Is to lie in hiding at or near this place, until the enemy dare no longer lose time in searching for you."

Rose shivered at the thought, but forced herself to ask:

"Which course do you think the safest and wisest?"

"If you were a man, or even a woman used to wild, open-air life and exercise, I'd say mount and cut across to Durango, even though it is almost certain that the Muck-a-mucks will expect something of the sort, and try their level best to cut you off from that refuge."

"If I must—"

"I fear you couldn't stand the strain," watching her closely as he spoke. "It would be hard for a man. No!" with his decision taken at last, "that is out of the question; though I hate to leave you here all alone, even for your own good, it must be done."

"I'll run any risk rather than that!"

"It will only be for a little while, dear child," taking her trembling hands, and pressing them reassuringly. "You will be perfectly safe here so long as you lie still and trust in Heaven! I'll come back to guide you to

safety, as true as there is a heaven above us. You believe me when I tell you this, Rose Bryer?"

"I know you will. I know I am foolishly timid, but I'd rather run the risk of death a score times over, than be left alone in this horrible darkness! You can't realize what terrible thoughts—"

"Drive them away with prayer, my poor child," his own tones far from steady, but with his decision unshaken. "It is for your own good that I go to pull the wool over our enemy's eyes, and because I firmly believe that in so acting, I am taking the only course that can prevent your falling into their hands again. If you knew them as well as I do, you would risk anything rather than that."

His tones were so earnest, that Rose could no longer hold out, and, with a desperate effort, she conquered her fears sufficiently to bid him act as he deemed wisest.

"Go, then, but remember that I have no earthly hope save in you, friend of my father!" she added, sinking to the ground and bowing her head on her hands.

Major Magnet dared not trust himself to make reply in words, but he bent over to drop a kiss on her brow, then hurried away to where he had left the horse, mounting it and riding back, pausing barely long enough to drop a word of encouragement, then dashing away at full speed.

Although he had heard nothing from the Muck-a-mucks of late, he felt sure they would not easily or readily give up all hopes of recapturing the maiden on whose account they had already dared so much.

"They must have discovered her flight by this time," he reflected, as he pressed on, anxious to reach a point from whence he could catch sight of the captured train. "If they have, they'll naturally suspect me of having a finger in the pie. If so, they'll reason just as I did at first jump—that we've made for Durango, through the hills. And with that clew as a guide, they'll make all haste to cut us off at the different fords, or to pick up our trail there in case they're too late for better, as they look at it."

Reasoning thus, and caring little for the noise he made, now that he was at a safe distance from the spot where poor Rose remained in suspenseful hiding, Major Magnet pressed his confiscated animal to the best speed the broken ground would permit, anxious to learn just what chance there was of his bold ruse succeeding.

This did not take long, thanks to the ground on that side of the iron trail being so much higher than the level of the track, and he drew rein, using his eyes as well as the distance would permit.

He could see the Mail and Express car plainly, thanks to the fire which was still burning, but he had only a partial glimpse of the passenger coaches, though he noticed a number of mounted forms moving between them and his present position.

"They've found it out, and they're on the scent," he grimly laughed, a hand mechanically dropping to his pistol. "If I was alone, they'd wake up in a holy hurry."

Although he would have preferred seeing the outlaws making all haste in the direction of Roaring Fork instead of searching the vicinity of the captured train, Major Magnet knew he could do no better than hasten to lay his false trail, believing that he could do this and get back long before this portion of the evil gang could find the present hiding-place of the one whose cause he was championing.

"That ulster would come in mighty handy now, but maybe I can play woman snug enough to fool 'em in this gloom, if I happen to be sighted by any of the gang," he reflected, turning his horse and making for the nearest ford above the railroad bridge.

He showed more caution now, keeping to the handiest cover and maintained a keen lookout, but he met with none of the outlaws while covering the distance to the ford.

As he drew near to this, he shifted his position in the side-saddle, tying a dark handkerchief over his hat and letting an end float over his face, then riding into the water, here barely knee-deep to his horse. But when still in the river, a hoarse yell rang out behind him.

CHAPTER XIV.

WATCHING, WAITING AND PLANNING.

"YENDER she goes, boys, crossin' the drink!" cried an excited voice, as a mounted man came plunging down through the bushes, scattering the loose stones in a miniature avalanche. "Hold on, thar, you gal!—I'll bloody murder ye ef ye don't!"

The spiteful report of gun or pistol closely followed the words, but Major Magnet only smiled grimly, for even his keen ears failed to catch the whistling of the lead, and that told him the shot had been aimed high, as a simple scare and not to strike flesh.

He was almost at the edge of the water, and bending low in the saddle, the more effectually to disguise his identity, he urged his good steed on. Two or three cat-like leaps carried them safely under cover and Major Magnet cast a glance over his shoulder, to see several of

the Muck-a-mucks just plunging down the slope to take the water.

"You'd hardly come so brash if you knew who you were following, my bully boys!" he grimly laughed, the temptation strong within him to read the rascals a lesson they would have no time to appreciate in this world; but the memory of Rose Bryer held his hand.

He urged his steed on as swiftly as possible for a few rods, then turned its head from the main trail into a side path, leaping to the ground and striking the animal heavily on its haunch, sending it ahead at renewed speed.

"May you run until those imps grow saddlesore in chasing you!" he muttered, slipping into cover and running silently back until close to the main trail.

Just in time to crouch low and count the Muck-a-mucks as they left the water and tore furiously along the trail, the thunder of their horses' hoofs keeping them from hearing the faint sounds which came from the side, instead of straight ahead.

"Bad luck wait upon you, gentlemen!" grimly laughed the major, as the befooled outlaws passed him by, keeping in the main trail. "May you hold that lead until your nags stumble and break your necks!"

With that benediction, Major Magnet crossed the trail and stole down the river, preferring to take a thorough wetting to risking a passage through the ford, though he had no cause for thinking more of the Muck-a-mucks were in a position for guarding the crossing.

"All the same, I'm not taking any wild chances so long as I've got her to fight for," was his reflection. "I never thought to feel toward another woman as I begin to feel toward her. And she asked me—what made her ask if I had a daughter?"

He came out on the bank of Roaring Fork, at that point widening and deepening, running swiftly between its rocky banks. A gleam of the rising moon fell across his face, showing it stern, hard-set, yet filled with an emotion such as few living beings had ever noticed in his countenance: pain and grief, yet with a fierce vengeance predominating.

With a swift, searching look up and down stream, Major Magnet slipped down the bank and entered the cold water without any noise to betray him. Turning on his back he swam silently across, only a portion of his face breaking the surface and making a ripple hardly as great as that of a muskrat in swimming. And when he landed it was under an overhanging bush which completely screened his leaving the water.

He paused on the bank to squeeze a portion of the water from his garments, and as he did so there dropped from his lips:

"All the same, I wish she hadn't been so ready to adopt me as a possible father!"

It was strange how persistently his mind dwelt on that point, and to none could it be stranger than to Major Magnet himself.

He was too old for love. Rose was but a mere child, compared with him, even in point of years, to say nothing of the black past which had aged him a century as he often felt. And yet—and yet!

Even his uncomfortably-damp garments could not banish those thoughts, and after a little he gave over the effort. And as so often happens, he had no sooner done so than what he had vainly sought came to him of its own accord.

Once more he was the cool, clear-brained, self-reliant man of the world, whose past lay buried, whose future held only vengeance on those who had wrecked his happiness and destroyed his heart.

Major Magnet made his way back to the spot where he had left Rose Bryer in hiding, as rapidly as possible. And on the way he heard nothing, saw nothing of the Muck-a-mucks.

"Maybe they've given it over as a bad job, but I wouldn't gamble on it. If I've hit their plans true, there's some of them watching from cover every move that is made in or about the train, ready to swoop down on their prize if it ventures to seek company and protection in that quarter!"

A rare glow filled the major's heart as Rose welcomed him with such undisguised delight, clasping his hand between hers, and if he had not prevented, would have gone so far as to press it to her lips.

"Don't—you hurt me," he huskily uttered, then hurriedly adding as he saw her innocent surprise: "Not because your grip is so mighty, little girl, but because this excess of joy makes me fear that you doubted my returning as I promised."

"I knew you would come if life lasted, dear friend, but I feared—those frightful men!"

"Are mighty trifling monsters, after all," he laughed, as he went on to describe how easily he had pulled the wool over their eyes.

"Then they are gone? We can go at once to the cars?" Rose almost breathlessly asked, her eyes glowing through the dim light which fell from the heavens above. "I want to see the light! I want to be where there are no hideous shadows! I can't tell you what I have suffered while watching and waiting here!"

"I can guess it in part, poor child," the ma-

jor said, sympathizingly, yet with an ugly wrench at his heart as he saw how eager she was to break the companionship which he found so sweet, even with all its drawbacks; for of course their close relations must end when she was once more among friends.

"Then we can go? You will guide me back to the train?"

"Are you sure you can walk—with the aid of a strong arm?"

"Or without it—see!" and Rose sprung forward a pace or two, performing the act with the slightest hint of a limp. "It was nearly all fancy, you see, though at one time I feared I was completely paralyzed. But I can't think of that without—ugh!" with a shiver.

"Then don't recall it, little lady," laughed Major Magnet, taking a hand and drawing it through his arm. "We'll see how good a mountaineer you are, at all events. Don't be afraid of breaking my arm. Wisest not to task your ankle too severely, though if worse comes to worst, I dare say I could manage to carry even a giantess like you—for a yard or two at a stretch."

Rose joined in his laugh, and Major Magnet was content. It could only do her good to feel lighter at heart, and there might even yet be sore trials in store for the poor child before he could place her safely in the loving arms of her father.

"By blood, not by adoption!" he mentally added, with a wry grimace which was hidden by the darkness.

Instead of growing worse, that pain in her ankle passed away with exercise, and before long Major Magnet had to restrain rather than assist his fair companion, for he was not yet sure the Muck-a-mucks had all departed from that vicinity. And with Rose Bryer under his care, the Man of Nerve was growing unusually cautious.

Without saying as much to Rose, he deemed it best to take a somewhat roundabout course instead of making directly for the train, preferring to gain the high ground opposite the rear coaches, or even the rocky point still further down the track, to following more directly along the trail laid by the runaway horse.

By this means they would be more likely to elude the outlaws, in case any of their number lingered still in hopes of intercepting the prize which had so mysteriously slipped through their fingers, should Rose Bryer attempt to return to the cars.

Thanks to this precaution, Rose had no suspicion they were so near the train until the lights suddenly burst upon her eager eyes as they gained the crest of the rocky point. And only the swift palm of Major Magnet stifled the glad cry that might have brought the skulking enemy down upon them.

"I can guess something of what you feel, Miss Bryer," he quietly spoke in answer to her astonished glance. "But you promised to trust me, and there can be no trust without obedience. That glad cry might have stirred up a hornet's nest about our ears."

"But all seems peaceful down there!" murmured Rose, though she instinctively clung to his strong arm. "Surely the robbers have fled."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Sit down here, please, and let me talk to you soberly, little lady. Let me tell you what, I fear, will shock you greatly, but which I deem it only right you should know."

In silence Rose obeyed, a little awed by his sudden gravity. He half reclined at her feet, but in such a position that both could gaze down on the train and the space between without turning their heads.

As she had said, all seemed peaceful below. The train was still divided, but that was all that told of past trouble. The Mail and Express car was dark, only to be seen by the still glowing embers near the track. A few of the passengers were moving about the coaches, but the majority were inside, visible by the lamplight through the windows.

Surely the train-robbers had taken their departure?

"I'd think the same, only for something which I heard shortly after leaving the car in hopes of being of service to you, Miss Bryer," said Major Magnet, answering her wistful glance. "I knew that instead of taking you to safety, as he doubtless imagined, your escort was insuring your capture by the outlaws."

"He was frightened—for my sake," faltered the maiden, her eyes drooping and her face turning pale again as that haunting doubt returned with redoubled force.

"Of course," was the quiet response. "All the same, it was an unfortunate action. And yet—possibly not, since you are now here, free as air. If that venture had not been made, you might have been placed under a guard too strong for any one man to overcome."

"But why—I don't understand you!"

"It was difficult for me to understand it, even with all I heard while prowling about in search of something to guide me to your side," was the quick response. "As to what I heard: enough to convince me that this raid of the Muck-a-

mucks was partly if not mainly planned for the express purpose of getting you into their power!"

"But why should that be?" Rose asked, bewilderedly.

"For the purpose of exacting a heavy ransom, beyond a doubt. Your father is already a rich man, Miss Bryer. And in addition to his wealth already insured, he owns a mine—the Golden Hope it is called—which rumor says is fabulously rich, though as yet only partially developed. They may even have set longing eyes on that mine as a reward for their trouble and the risk they must run in playing so bold a game as this. They may even have decided to ask the Golden Hope in exchange for your freedom, though how they meant to guard against after punishment is beyond me, just now."

"And I have you to thank for my freedom, dear sir!" murmured Rose, bending forward with a grateful light in her dark eyes as she gently, timidly, almost lovingly touched his brow with her little hand.

Major Magnet abruptly drew back, averting his face to hide the almost fierce light that leaped into his eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

A BRIDLE ON HIS TONGUE.

ROSE BRYER might have noticed something strange in his actions, but in following his movement her eyes were arrested by a brilliant point of light far beyond, which she instantly recognized as the headlight of an approaching train, and a cry of apprehension parted her lips before she could recall it.

"Warn them—stop them, for the love of Heaven!" she gasped, springing to her feet as though she must rush to the rescue of the unsuspecting people on the divided train below.

Major Magnet caught her in his strong arms, pressing her closer to his breast than a mere friend might have thought of doing, forcing a low laugh as there came floating through the air a clear, warning whistle from the freight-train.

"They've already been warned, and know what they're coming to," he explained, reading the signals aright, then drawing his trembling companion back under cover as he swept the hillside with a keen, comprehensive glance.

Although he began to feel fairly certain that the Muck-a-mucks had all left that vicinity, as he knew a portion of their number had, it was still possible that some were skulking near enough to catch and try to investigate that cry.

True, the coming of the freight-train would lessen the danger of an open attack, even should his fears for Rose prove true, but he had other reasons for wishing to keep her presence a secret, of which the maiden herself as yet knew nothing.

Relieved by this assurance, yet still trembling with excitement and fairly unconscious of the arm that was so tenderly and protectingly supporting her, Rose Bryer watched the passengers below, now flocking out of the coaches like frightened sheep. They at least failed to so interpret those steam blasts. What if this protecting stranger should be in error? What if the rapidly approaching train was simply passing by a regular point for whistling, and knew naught of what lay just on the further side of the cut into which their engine was now diving?

"Shut your eyes, little lady, and before you can fairly open them again you will see that I'm right," softly laughed the major, readily interpreting the shiver which that dread doubt sent through her little figure. "See!"

It was as he said. The engine had already slowed, and as its headlight came into view of the startled passengers about the divided train, it was advancing but little faster than a man might walk.

"The conductor or porter ran back to stop the freight, no doubt, and if the boy was frightened badly enough, he may even have reached the station we passed last, to take the freight there and bring it on to the rescue. If so, word was surely telegraphed ahead to Durango and other points, of trouble along the line."

Rose drew a long breath of intense relief as she saw the engine come to a halt while still a safe distance from the coaches, men with weapons in their hands leaping to the ground and greeting the passengers with a united cheer that ought to frighten every lingering Muck-a-muck into headlong flight.

"If papa isn't frightened—if we could only send him word that I am safe and unturt!" she murmured, wistfully glancing into that kindly face, much as a child might look at an elder in whose powers it has implicit reliance.

"Let us hope that he'll hear nothing of the trouble until you are there to tell him yourself, little lady," was all he could reply.

"With you to help me where my memory fails, dear friend," as she gently pressed her flushed cheek against his arm, her eyes fixed on the glad scene below them, never once dreaming of the torrent of strong emotions which that little action renewed in the veins of this gray-haired man who had bidden her trust him as she might her own father.

Just so had another woman—young and fair

and lovable as this impulsive child, and marvelously like unto her in face as in actions, too! Just so had that other been wont to thank him, when her heart was too full for easy speech.

The memory was maddening, since with it came all that had followed after, and almost roughly Major Magnet drew away from his companion, his tones cold and measured as he spoke again:

"You are eager to run down yonder to join your fellow-passengers, Miss Bryer, but I must ask you to delay yet a little longer."

"Why should we?" with a start, a touch of that banished fear coming back to her great eyes as they turned upon his dimly seen face. "Surely those dreadful men have fled, and there can be nothing more to fear from them?"

"Such of the evil gang as wore the insignia may have done so, but what of those still more to be dreaded? For, on my word as a man, Miss Bryer, I believe there were secret allies aboard our train."

"Even if so, they would not dare harm me—with you as a guard."

"Not openly, perhaps, but you had a trusted escort before, and he rushed you into trouble instead of protecting you from it."

Rose shivered, that haunting voice coming back to her again, and though he made no sign, Major Magnet felt that she was learning to distrust handsome Creed Ashmole. Did he dare tell her all? Would it be wisest? Would it still further shake her already overtaken nerves?

"Sit down, please," he said, gravely. "I have much more to tell which you ought to hear before rejoining those people down yonder."

The maiden obeyed, though a faint sigh parted her lips. She longed to leave these ugly shadows for the clear light. She longed to see many friendly faces about her, to hear their unrestrained voices. She felt that much more of this strange, unnatural life would end in driving her crazy.

"You need not fear our missing connections, little lady," laughed the major, reading part of her fears and hastening to set them at rest.

"While prowling around in search of a lost treasure—my friend's treasure—I picked up quite a bit of information. Part of that was how our engine had been disposed of. The Muck-a-mucks run it off the track into a gully, where it lies a mass of useless iron."

"Can't that one engine serve both trains?" ventured Rose.

"When the track is repaired, yes. If I'm any judge, that is just what our good friends of the freight intend doing as quickly as possible," nodding his head toward the bustling men beyond and below. "And while they are thus bridging over the break, I beg you will answer a few questions. Be sure I'm not asking them to gratify a simple curiosity, Miss Bryer."

"I could never think of you in connection with aught mean or petty or trifling, Major Magnet," was her earnest response. "Ask me what you will. I freely admit your right."

"This is your first trip so far West, then?"

"Yes. I hardly expected to come, even now, but father wrote that he would not be able to pay me his long promised visit, through business complications, and asked me how I'd like to come out to Animas City instead. Of course the idea pleased me, and I told him so. Then he said he would send a trusted friend to meet and escort me on the way."

"That friend was Mr. Ashmole?"

Rose bowed her head. She hardly dared speak just then, for that voice—so strangely like the voice of Creed Ashmole—seemed to be ringing in her ears once more.

"I supposed so, from his actions on the train," quietly uttered the major, curbing his impulse to bluntly accuse the handsome young fellow with shameful treachery. "I had met him before, though hardly often enough to call him a friend. He is in your father's employ, I believe. He is an old friend? You had met him before you accepted his escort for this journey?"

"I only knew him by the letters which he brought me from father, but—you are hiding something from me!" with sudden suspicion. "It can't be that I have been so basely deceived? He is really what he represented himself? Father did send him?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it, dear child," quickly replied the major. "As I told you, I've met Mr. Ashmole a number of times in your father's office. He is a sort of secretary and confidential clerk, and that your father selected him to act as your escort, ought to be recommendation enough for any man, stranger or friend."

Rose was silenced, if not quite convinced. Though she tried to banish that haunting voice and reason herself out of the ridiculous fancy that it was indeed Creed Ashmole who had spoken in front of her hiding-place, she was only partially successful.

As for Major Magnet, he was content to let that point rest for the present, satisfied that there was nothing like a love affair between the young couple. Though Creed Ashmole should suffer for his vile treachery, the proper time had not yet arrived for exposing him in his real colors, and as there was a chance that Rose might meet him again before reaching her des-

tination, better let her have no chance for showing him what the future held in store.

"What I am about to say may shock you, Miss Bryer, but you ought to know why I fight so shy of taking you back to the train. It is because I still fear that you have ugly enemies among those people, and if they were to see you return, even under my escort, another attempt might be made to get you again into their evil clutches."

"I said I believed the train robbers had allies aboard. I say so still. In no other way can be explained the words which I chanced to hear while searching for you in the gloom. I learned enough then to feel sure your abduction was an important part of their scheme, if not their sole reason for their halting the train, though they tried to cover it up under a general robbery."

"What am I to do?" faltered Rose, shivering nervously. "I cannot stop here. I cannot walk all the way to Animas City."

Major Magnet laughed softly, more to reassure his fair companion than from any actual lightness of heart just then.

"I'll not ask impossibilities of you, little lady, be sure. You shall ride to your destination on yonder train, or at least as far as Durango. You should go in state as the heroine of the night, if I knew that might be done without again endangering you."

"Then you think—"

"That there must have been a traitor aboard our train, else how could the Muck-a-mucks know just which train to lay a trap for? They must have known for hours just when to expect your coming. And if the one who sent them such information was cunning enough to wear his mask of innocence so long, what is to hinder him from still playing the role of an honest traveler? What is to hinder him from keeping a close watch for your return, and then from signaling his evil gang? And though I can't explain exactly how that could be arranged if we delay our return until the train is about ready to pull out once more, still it is not impossible: even then he might give a sign that would result in another deadly trap being sprung to gain their rich prize."

Rose shivered with sickening despair even at the bare thought, but she managed to utter the words:

"What am I to do, then? I have only you to guide me, now, and I am feeling so weak, so fearful, so distrustful of my own powers!"

"You trust me, then, little lady?"

The maiden leaned forward, gazing intently into his face, now dimly revealed by the pale moonlight. Then she said:

"I do, I will. I trust you as I would my own father."

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPRESS PACKAGES.

"If I betray that trust, may God fail me in the hour of my greatest need, Rose Bryer," solemnly uttered Major Magnet as he clasped her hands between his and pressed them firmly.

With those words came a strange sense of peace and security to the maiden, and her past fears seemed to melt away like fog before the warm sunshine.

"Tell me what I am to do, dear friend," she said, simply.

"You will not be afraid to remain here alone for a short time?"

"Not if you tell me it is all for the best," was the brave reply.

"I believe it is, or I'd never propose such a trial after all you have so bravely endured this night, little lady."

"Then I will stay."

"I hardly think there is any danger to be dreaded, beyond the airy nothings of the night," with a soft laugh that went far to strengthen her. "If you lie quiet, a dozen Muck-a-mucks might pass by within as many yards of your refuge without so much as suspecting what a rare treasure they were missing."

"Then you still think some of those evil men are near?"

"No, I don't, to be frank. And yet, they are hard to trust in. They may be hiding near by, hoping to receive a signal from their secret ally, but if so they'll take precious good care not to expose themselves to notice by wandering about, so you're safe against them, don't you see? But if anything should happen—you know how to shoot?"

"I know which is supposed to be the dangerous end of a pistol, if that may be called knowing how to shoot," with a faint laugh as he placed a revolver close beside her.

"That's all that is necessary, even should trouble come, for I'll not be gone long, and at the worst I'll always be near enough to answer such a summons before harm could come to you."

"May I know where you are going?"

"Certainly; the trust is not to be all on one side, little lady, even if you do have to furnish the greatest portion, thanks to circumstances. I am going down yonder to engage passage to Animas City for you and myself. Is that sufficient?"

Rose looked as though she would like more light, but for fear of seeming to repent her pledge to trust him implicitly, she forced back the questions that struggled for utterance, bowing her head silently.

"I appreciate your anxiety, Rose," taking her hand and pressing it warmly as he added: "But as my plans are not yet fully formed, I can't tell you more just now. When I come back, you shall know everything."

"Do not be any longer than you can help, please."

"If not exactly Ariel, I'll do my level best, little lady. And you must lie hidden under this bush until you distinctly recognize me. And don't give a sign even then, unless I call you by that title: little lady. You understand me fully?"

"I understand. I will do precisely as you bid me, dear friend."

Even with important work before him, Major Magnet found it hard to tear himself away from the side of this maiden, who had so strangely come into his life, who had so strangely taken full possession of—was it his heart?

"I vowed never to love a woman again, but—And she looks on me as a sort of adopted father, just for a night!"

With that bitter reflection, Major Magnet turned away, passing over the little rise instead of making his way directly down the slope to the cars. Although he had no fears of being attacked, even should any of the train-robbers be skulking near, he had his reasons for wishing to keep out of sight, not only of such enemies, but of those who might be called friends, at the cars below.

"If I can get hold of Oberland, and win his backing, the rifle won't be nigh so hard to make!"

He made a circuit wide enough to guard against his being noticed by any person near the coaches, then drawing near the point where the passenger engine had been wrecked by the train-robbers.

The united crews were busily at work, patching up the track for temporary use. This was not a very formidable task after all, since only a single rail had been removed by the wreckers, and it had escaped injury from the locomotive when that frightful plunge was taken.

A number of the ties were broken and torn out of place, the opposite rail being bent and loosened; but all that could be remedied, and by cautious pushing the cars could be gotten over the dangerous point.

Major Magnet slouched his hat, and turned up the collar of his coat, knotting a handkerchief about his neck, thus obscuring his face, and disguising his identity sufficiently, without making it an object of suspicion to any who might notice him.

He found the portly conductor manfully at work, puffing like a porpoise, and a few minutes passed before he found a fair chance to make himself known to Oberland.

"Mein Gott! I hear you vvas deadt!" that honest fellow spluttered, as the major spoke to him; but fortunately no one else caught those startled words, and Major Magnet quickly drew the conductor to one side, where they could talk without fear of being overheard.

"Never mind just how I happen to come back from the land of ghosts, my friend," laughed the major, freeing his hand from that excitedly joyous grasp. "The story'll keep for a more convenient opportunity, and I've got a mighty favor to ask of you."

"Ask anything but the good frau, dear boy," laughed Oberland, losing his broken English, as he fairly realized that the man whom he deemed murdered and growing cold, was alive and quite himself.

Major Magnet cast a quick glance to the work, seeing that it was rapidly nearing completion, so far as it could be finished with the tools and means at their disposal.

"Come a little further off, please, and I'll tell you what I want. They'll not miss you, unless it be by finding more room for their elbows to swing in."

"I left a pound of fat for every furlong between here and the station!" solemnly declared Oberland, wiping his brow and puffing at the bare memory of his long night race.

"You can spare it without being taken for a living skeleton, old fellow, but that don't count. You saw Ashmole jump the car with Miss Bryer? Well, the Muck-a-mucks got her, and I managed to get her away again; just how, I'll explain when there's more time to spare."

"Enough that I found out enough to feel morally certain that this whole business sprung from a wish to get her into their clutches, to squeeze money out of her father. And that there was somebody on the train that kept them posted as to her journey."

"Creed Ashmole, for a moral!"

"Don't say it, even if you think so," hastily uttered the major. "If it is he, be sure he'll pay the penalty when the right time comes. What I want to get at is this: The young lady can't hoof it clear to Animas City, nor yet as far as Durango."

"What's the matter with the train?"

"It might be a good deal, if she was seen to

come back to it. It might mean another and far worse wreck between here and Durango, or even on the further side, should she keep on to Animas. Mind you, Oberland, I'm not saying that I know all this, but I have good reasons for believing that some such attempt would be made if it could possibly be brought about. And so—I want to send her on to Animas by Express!"

Oberland rubbed his nose dubiously, though it was clear enough that he caught an inkling of the scheme devised by Major Magnet.

"It must be done," firmly added the major. "You can help me win over Tom Weeden, and you shall! Both Miss Bryer and myself are going to make the remainder of the trip to Animas City in the Express car."

With a man like Major Magnet, to will was to win, and though the arrangements consumed far more time than he liked, for Rose's sake, in the end he was successful, and both Oberland and Tom Weeden agreed to aid his plans all that lay in their power.

"The main point is to get her safely aboard without another soul seeing her, and that I think can be accomplished. You, old man, will see that all passengers are in the coaches. You, Weeden, will be ready to open up and help her in when I come to the south side of the car."

Both men promised to play their parts, and borrowing a hat and a heavy ulster from the Express messenger, Major Magnet crossed the track and hastened away to rejoin his fair charge.

"The poor girl will be fighting phantoms and ghosts without end, and will give me a joyous welcome—as her father, for a night."

Major Magnet shrugged his shoulders with that conclusion, for it was becoming almost like a nightmare unto him. And yet—he knew he was not in love with the girl whom he had never seen before that evening. Knew it, for hadn't he sworn never to love another woman?

Somewhat contrary to his expectations, he found the maiden cool and composed, so much so that not a sound came from her place of hiding until after he pronounced the signal agreed upon.

"You'll do, little lady!" he laughed, lightly. "I more than feared to find you swooning through pure dread of airy phantoms. What would you have done had I attempted to share your hiding-place before giving the signal?"

"I should have shot you—or tried my best," quietly replied Rose, handing him back his revolver.

"I actually believe you would."

"You bade me distrust any one who came without that password. You told me to shoot, and I promised to obey you."

"I'm bubbling over with gladness—not at your turning so awfully bloodthirsty, little lady," with a soft laugh, "but because it proves to me you are not nearly so worn out as I feared. You'll stand what little remains, easily enough."

"There is much more to endure, then?" her voice beginning to falter just a trifle.

"Only this, my child," taking her hand and assisting her to her feet. "I'll tell you what sort of plan I've shaped as we walk along."

He led her in much the same line laid out by himself a short time before, a glance showing him that the break in the track was almost repaired. And as Rose listened, her countenance lighted up, for this was so much better than she had been led to expect.

"Why, I thought something terrible was in prospect!" she laughed, almost gayly. "This is nothing but a picnic—is that a Western term, major?" with a shy, upward glance as she hugged his arm.

Nearing the point where they must cross the track, Major Magnet called a halt, long enough to invest Rose with that slouch hat and huge ulster, laughing with her at the complete transmogrification before renewing their walk.

"Our friend in the car is a married man, so it won't be so awful," he apologized, in mock seriousness. "And as an expressman for many long years, he is accustomed to receiving many curious packages, though I doubt if he ever before carried such a rare jewel in such ugly setting as this makes!"

A few moments more brought them to the south side of the Express car, without meeting any one or, so far as they could tell, attracting attention. And as Major Magnet gave the agreed-upon signal, Tom Weeden slid back the door and helped Rose Bryer inside the car.

"Don't charge according to value, Tom, or I'm broke!" laughed the major, as he lightly leaped into the car after his fair charge.

CHAPTER XVII. WHAT CAN IT MEAN?

VERY soon afterward the first move was made toward crossing over the place where the passenger engine was wrecked, the Mail and Express being coupled on to the passenger coaches as the freight locomotive pushed them up, then one by one the cars were gradually, cautiously pushed across the break, followed afterward by the long line of freight cars, without the slightest sign of an accident.

A danger signal was left flying on either side

of the imperfect bit of track, then such haste as was thought safe was made.

The run was a short one, counting by miles, and the day had not yet begun to dawn when Durango was reached.

Here the tidings had been sent from the station at which Oberland had caught the freight, and quite a little crowd had gathered, eager to learn the details, floating around the Mail and Express car to note the bullet-scars and the trace of flames.

Major Magnet had in part anticipated all this, and before the town was reached he had formed a snug if not exactly luxurious nest amid the Express matter for Rose, where she ran no danger of being discovered by the curious, so long as none of them were permitted to effect an entrance into the car itself.

She was willing enough, though she never once suspected that her present guardian had fears for more than unpleasant curiosity on her account, for she felt as though a thousand Muck-a-mucks would be impotent to work her harm, now that the wilderness was passed and she was under such gallant protection.

She snuggled down in her nest, with Major Magnet not far off, muffled to the chin in that great ulster, his hat slouched over his face until he looked, as she averred afterward, a modern Fra Diavolo.

Here the engine was switched to the head, and the run to Animas City was more rapidly and safely made, though the day had dawned and the glorious sun was fairly climbing the sky before they pulled up at the station.

Here, too, the news had preceded them, collecting a numerous crowd, each item of which plainly denied itself of the most importance and the only one deserving earliest enlightenment.

Major Magnet, bidding Rose lie hidden until his return, left the Express car on the side opposite the station, quickly mingling with the crowd, looking for Keene Bryer, whom he felt sure would be there to greet his daughter and her escort, even if he had not before that heard of the attack of train robbers.

"Ashmole dropped off at Durango," hurriedly whispered Oberland, as Major Magnet passed him by on that vain quest.

What could it mean? Surely the hands of the Muck-a-mucks could not have extended their blow this far?

Satisfied at length that, whatever the cause, Keene Bryer was not among the crowd at the depot, Major Magnet returned to the Express car where Rose was eagerly anticipating the coming of her father, nothing in his strong face betraying that ugly fancy.

"Yet a little longer waiting, Miss Bryer," he said, with an easy smile as he noted the look of disappointment which came into her face. "Word didn't get here until all honest men were locked in the arms of Morpheus, and we'll take your father quite by surprise. Hope he'll have left us at least one little bite, for I'm actually famishing!"

Since Creed Ashmole was not at Animas City, Major Magnet felt less doubts about exposing his fair charge to view, and taking advantage of a moment when the crowd thinned about the Express, he handed her out on the side away from the station, drawing a haud through his arm and hurrying away from the depot.

"I suppose you think us all heathen out here, little lady, but I thought a brisk little walk would be all the better for your appetite after being penned up in that nest so long. You agree with me?"

"You are always right, dear friend, but—it takes longer to get to where papa is!" sighed the maiden, still feeling her disappointment at not finding him at the station to meet her. "You are sure you gave me the right reason? You are quite sure that nothing—he is well?"

"All but having his little lady by his side, and that we'll remedy in a very few minutes more," confidently declared the major.

And yet a touch of that same premonition of evil assailed him, too strongly to be readily banished. Keene Bryer surely must have known the probable hour of his child's arrival, and just as surely he would have been waiting and watching for her, had nothing serious occurred to hinder him. And if so, he would have been among the earliest to learn of the attack by train robbers.

Nothing of these doubts and fears would be permit in face or voice, however, and Rose Bryer never suspected the fact that her doubts were more than shared by the good friend that night had brought her.

Major Magnet talked well, and he exerted himself even more than usual during that walk to the boarding-house where Keene Bryer had his rooms for the present.

"A neat, comfortable, home-like place, I assure you, though nothing in comparison to what is in store: for I can easily believe that friend Bryer will prefer a younger, more graceful housekeeper than worthy Mrs. Carver, now that the opportunity is offered him."

"I expected to find papa at some hotel, though I really gave the matter little thought."

"If you only knew them, as I do, through sad experience, you would begin right now to thank him for having better taste," groaned the major.

"Hotel in name, abomination in reality! But yonder is the place of refuge, and in sixty seconds more my self-appointed duty will come to an end!"

"For which you must be devoutly grateful—and I can't blame you. Nor thank you, dear friend, as you deserve," her light tones altering to one far less steady, tears dimming her dark eyes as her hand gave his arm a gentle, tremulous pressure.

Major Magnet said nothing in reply, and he was glad of an excuse in rapping sharply at the door of the boarding-house.

The call was quickly answered by the landlady herself, who happened to be passing through the hall at that moment. The major greeted her by name, and before asking for Keene Bryer, passed with his fair companion into the parlor.

"This is Miss Rose Bryer, daughter to your guest, Mr. Bryer, dear Mrs. Carver. Of course he has risen?"

"Take me to him at once, please," cried Rose, unable to contain her impatience longer.

"The laws bless me—but I can't!" panted the fleshy landlady, taken by surprise. "I don't know no more'n the land where he is this blessed minnit—so I don't, now!"

Major Magnet caught the poor girl in his arms and gently guided her to a sofa, hastily muttering words of consolation, trying to dull the force of that blow as best he might.

"She only means that your father has left the house, little lady, not that—Mr. Bryer was quite well when you last saw him, ma'am?"

"Never weller in his life, and that makes me think so strange of it, sir. Or if he had acted displeased about anything in the service, sir, it wouldn't have stirred me up so mortal bad, but—"

"He stopped here last night, of course?" sharply interrupted the major, feeling that it were better to learn the whole truth at once than subject Rose to much more rambling talk of this nature.

"Nor the night afore, neither, though how he could leave like that without so much as saying—"

"He had not given up his rooms here?"

"No, and that is part why—"

"Unexpected business has detained him, of course, but I'll know all about that as soon as I can call at his office," smiling easily and seeming to take it all as a matter of course as he turned to Rose, who seemed half-stunned by this unexpected happening. "You are too tired to even think of walking so far, Miss Bryer, but I'll be back before you can half do justice to one of Mrs. Carver's famous cups of tea."

"I would rather—"

"So would I, so that settles it," nodded the major, briskly turning to the landlady and begging her to care for her new guest after her own inimitable style.

He only waited long enough to make sure the fussy landlady fully understood his wishes, then promising Rose to perform his errand as speedily as possible, he left the house and strode rapidly down town in the direction of Keene Bryer's office.

"What can it all mean?" he asked himself, his brows wrinkled and a sorely troubled light filling his gray eyes. "He surely knew his daughter was on the way to Animas? Then why has he disappeared after this fashion, without leaving even a word of explanation behind him?"

Almost involuntarily the answer to this last question flashed across his brain. The same evil plotters who had brought about that daring attempt to kidnap the daughter, had set a snare in this city for the parent!

Though this was his belief, Major Magnet fought stubbornly against it, hoping against hope that he would find the wished-for clew at the office; but when that point was gained, he came to a temporary standstill.

The building was closed and locked. There was no announcement on the door. Nothing to give him even the faintest of clews.

He stopped at several places where he knew Keene Bryer had had business dealings, but left each one no wiser than when he entered. No one seemed to know aught about the gentleman or his recent movements, and the major dared not question them too closely, for it was no part of his policy to set idle gossip afloat if that could be avoided.

"I'd rather face the whole gang with Captain Junius at their head than go back this way!" he muttered, frowning darkly as he reluctantly turned his face toward Mrs. Carver's boarding-house, where he knew poor Rose must be anxiously counting the moments. "There's something gone wrong, and I'm sore afraid that something is only too easily guessed at. He never could have left of his own free will, to stay away so long, knowing as he must that his daughter was due last night."

Though as yet in the dark as to the precise means used, Major Magnet felt almost certain that Keene Bryer had fallen into some cunning snare set by the villains who were scheming for his money.

"I'll get at the bottom of it, in time, but the first thing is to set the mind of that poor child

at ease; and I'll do it if bold lying has any virtue!"

His plan already shaped, Major Magnet quickened his steps and soon reached the boarding-house, entering without stopping to knock, meeting Rose at the parlor door, her face pale, her eyes showing how severely she had suffered.

"It's all right, little lady," he cried, cheerily, before she could speak. "Important business called your father out of town, but he'll be back to-morrow unless something unforeseen should turn up. He knew you would be safe with Mr. Ashmole, and a very heavy sum of money depended on his instant action."

It cut him to the heart to see how Rose brightened up at this bold falsehood, but he deemed the end justified the means, and after a long, peaceful sleep the maiden would be better prepared for sorrow if the worst must be told. And before he left the house for his own hotel he had gained her promise to both eat and sleep all she could.

"Poor little lady! I'm afraid she'll need it!" he mused, darkly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAJOR RECEIVES A CALLER.

ALTHOUGH Major Magnet himself felt the lack of food and sleep, he gave no thought to himself until after he had provided for Rose Bryer.

He smoothed down the ruffled feathers of the landlady, and left the house with the comforting knowledge that Rose was in friendly hands, and that she would lack for nothing material, however much she might suffer mentally.

"I could kick myself for lying so brazenly to the little lady," the major muttered to himself as he moved down town, "and all the harder because she took it all in like a lamb. She trusts me wholly, and I—well, the time'll come when she'll know that I was lying for her own good, though that's precious slim comfort to me!"

So stirred up was the major over this unexpected complication that he forgot for the time being how much sleep he had lost of late, and how long it had been since solid food passed his lips. He visited every place where he felt even the ghost of a chance lay of his learning any thing about the movements of Keene Bryer, but only to be baffled at every turn.

No one seemed to have seen him since two days before, and even those who had met him latest, could say nothing as to his present whereabouts. It was as though Keene Bryer had suddenly dropped out of the world itself!

"I've got to get a bite and something to eat," he at length decided, conscious at last of that double need. "My brain is thick as pudding, and I can't even begin to think!"

He at once sought his hotel, ordering a mighty meal, outside of which he speedily placed himself, then sought his room, leaving orders not to be called unless some one by the name of Bryer sent word or called in person.

Once snugly in bed, Major Magnet almost immediately fell asleep and never so much as changed sides until the rest of the day was gone and the night as well!

It was the rolling ramble of the breakfast gong that finally aroused him, and for a few moments he could not realize what had happened and how many hours he had passed in slumber.

"All right!" with a grim smile as he leaped out of bed and dressed himself. "It wasn't until to-day that Keene Bryer was to return, and I'll be all the better fitted for facing the little lady. If the worst is to come, God knows I'll need all my wits and nerve to keep her from breaking down altogether!"

Feeling hungry as a wolf, Major Magnet made his way to the dining-room, after first stopping at the desk to ask if any word or person had come for him. The negative reply clouded his face, but could not harm his appetite, and he ate like one who knows not how many hours of hard and trying labor lie before him.

Lighting a cigar, he took a seat on the broad piazza, with his feet resting on the railing in front, composing his thoughts, and trying to invent a plausible excuse for the non-appearance of Keene Bryer, should he be obliged to call on Rose without definite information.

It was while thus occupied that he caught sight of Creed Ashmole rapidly approaching, his head bandaged, and his face unusually pale, but with strong emotion showing plainly, as he sprang up the steps with outstretched hand, crying:

"Major Magnet, I must thank you—thank you for saving what I hold dearer even than life—my honor!"

With face as expressionless as that of a sphinx, the major dropped his feet to the floor, and turned to coolly accept the extended hands, though if he had yielded to the impulse within him, Creed Ashmole would have gone down those steps even more quickly than he ran up them.

"I hardly think I catch on, but if you're so anxious—shake!"

"I mean your work of last night," huskily added Ashmole, casting a quick glance around

them, as though he would prefer a more private place in which to make his explanations. "Miss Bryer—she is safe?"

"She was, when I last saw the lady."

"Thank Heaven for that much!" was the fervent ejaculation. "It is all owing to you, dear sir, that I'm not more than half crazy this minute! I could hardly realize the glad truth when word came to Durango that she was safe and unharmed. Why—"

Ashmole broke off abruptly, as a couple of guests came out to take seats on the veranda, and reading his mind aright, Major Magnet rose with the guarded words:

"Come up to my room if you have aught to say which you'd rather not have other ears catch, Mr. Ashmole."

The offer was promptly accepted, and a few moments later they were in perfect seclusion, and Creed Ashmole was saying:

"I believe you were in the same coach with Miss Bryer and myself, major, though I failed to recognize you before those masked devils made their appearance."

"I saw you, Mr. Ashmole."

"Then you must have seen the rash move I took?"

"Yes. And at the time I marveled not a little that you should take such long chances, as well as that you succeeded in getting out of the car without being shot."

The young man brushed a hand across his brow, as though troubled to find the right words; but his hesitation did not last long, and with earnest tones and flushed face, he spoke rapidly:

"I can see now where I made my first mistake, major, but when you know how skeptical I am by nature, how sensitive to ridicule, and how intensely I abhor falling victim to a practical joke, I believe you will pity if not sympathize with me."

"Why should you care so much for my opinion, Mr. Ashmole?" coldly asked the major, finding it very hard to keep from expressing that very opinion in mighty plain terms, much as he wished to see how the daring schemer would explain his past conduct, and hoping to catch an inkling of his new plans.

"Because I feel that only through you can I hope to gain the full forgiveness of Miss Bryer," was the quick reply. "Because I fear she would not even listen to my explanation alone."

"Then why not call Keene Bryer to mediate between yourself and his daughter?" asked Major Magnet, keenly but covertly watching for a sign of treachery.

"I mean to call on him, but I thought my first duty lay here," was the instant reply, without a trace of either agitation or exultation to betray the successful plotter. "I wanted to clear myself in your eyes, since you saved the young lady whom my rash folly endangered."

"What I wondered at most was why the rascals let you pass them so easily," nodded the major, still on the watch to trap his caller.

Creed Ashmole ran a hand into his bosom, bringing forth a crumpled envelope, extracting therefrom a half sheet of commercial note, covered over with large, clumsy writing.

"Read that, please," he said, handing the paper to Major Magnet.

In silence those keen eyes obeyed, quickly mastering the ill-spelled contents of the note of warning; for such it purported to be. There was no address at beginning or end, but the lines ran thus:

"There's snags ahead, an' don't you fergit it! The boss is got it in fer you an' ole Brire, an' he's playin' fer to git even. It'll come to-night. The train 'll git recked an' th' gal tuck away ef you don't fool 'em slick. Watch fer a sign, an' when you see it, take the gal an' make a brake fer that end o' the keer. It'll be me. I'll let you pass ef you pitch a weaselskin to me. Then get her off through the hills ef you kin. Ef not, you're both gone—dead sure!"

As soon as the major reached the last word, he refolded the paper and thrust it into his breast-pocket, coolly saying:

"It may come handy as a clew. You won't object to my keeping it when I tell you that I've made up my mind to hunt these Muck-a-mucks down, Mr. Ashmole."

"Keep it if you like, certainly," though there was just the least tremor visible in his tones. "It is nothing to me, now. If I had only paid more attention to it last night!"

"It might have saved the company a good sum, but all's well that ends well. They can afford the loss, and Miss Bryer will soon be herself again. I reckon, though, you got all the worst of that affair?" he added, gravely with a meaning glance at the bandaged head.

"It's nothing—only a cut, though it knocked me crazy for an hour or two, unless I've been dreaming," with a troubled look coming into his pale face and a hand rising to his brows. "But we were talking about that note of warning, were we not?"

"I had just finished reading it—yes," nodded the major.

"I found it hidden between the leaves of a book I had been reading before I went into the smoker to burn a cigar," resumed Ashmole, seemingly having collected his scattered thoughts

once more. "I told you my almost foolish horror of practical jokes. I took that note of warning for a clumsy jest, though it puzzled me to fix on the one most likely to commit such an act."

"If it is really genuine, the fellow who wrote it must have been smart enough to get into the coach. As a passenger, though, for of course he couldn't have worn the regalia of a Muck-a-muck."

"I can't explain it, even now," with a troubled look in his eyes. "All I know is that I found it in my book. Only for that silly dread of being laughed at, I would have shown it to the conductor, when precautions might have been taken against the wrecking. As it was, I kept silence, trying to discover the joker to turn the tables upon him."

"I can't explain why I kept the note. I soon forgot that I had put it into my pocket, and only remembered what it said when the air-brakes pitched us all in a heap. I pledge you my honor that until that very instant I had not even the remotest suspicion that the note was a genuine warning against peril to come!"

"Your word is amply sufficient, dear sir," smoothly uttered Major Magnet, with a bow that served to veil the keen fire that leaped into his steel-gray eyes. "No doubt nine out of every ten men aboard that train would have thought the same; and the tenth would have been covered over with ridicule for showing such a preposterous screed."

Creed Ashmole drew a long breath of evident relief, and his face brightened a little as he listened.

"You are very kind to say so, major, and I thank you: how much, you will find it difficult to realize. I've suffered the torments of the damned ever since that attack was made, up to the moment in which I first learned, through the agent at Durango, that Miss Bryer was safe and sound in Animas City."

"I simply speak my thoughts, and deserve no thanks for them. Then you were not acting wholly from impulse, back yonder?"

"In leaving the car with Miss Bryer, you mean?"

Major Magnet nodded assent.

"I was acting on the note, if you remember. It told me to watch for a signal from one of the wreckers, then to make a break with the lady under my charge."

"I had forgotten even that, until the attack was really made. Then it seemed printed on my brain in letters of fire, and I prepared to act upon the advice in case I could see even the ghost of an opening. I did see it, or I thought so. You must have seen what followed. The sign came from the end where only one robber was visible, and I at once acted according to directions."

"What did you hope to gain, leaving all support behind you?"

CHAPTER XIX.

CREED ASHMOLE BEGS A FAVOR.

"I HAD thoughts only how I might save Miss Bryer from falling into the clutches of those villains."

"What puzzles me is what you hoped to gain by leaving behind you all friendly aid," persisted the major, curious to see how the fellow whom he knew to be a prominent actor in that dark night's work would attempt to clear himself from the tangle of lies.

"If I had known you better—if time had been granted for consultation or even one square thought—I might and doubtless would have acted differently. As it was, I could only remember the advice contained in that note, and in my excitement I acted upon it."

Major Magnet nodded, his face grave and full of well-assumed sympathy as he felt those eyes upon him.

"I'm not sitting in judgment, understand, Mr. Ashmole, but as you wanted me to hear your story, it's best to make all clear as we go along. You acted for what you deemed the best, of course."

"And so took my—Miss Bryer direct into the jaws of the cowardly wolves!" flashed Ashmole, his eyes aglow, something like a groan following the hot sentence. "For I had hardly left the coach before a lot of the devils jumped me. I did what I could, but they took me foul," and with a finger he tapped the bandages about his head.

"Yes, I remember I thought you were laid out for all time when I first stumbled across you."

"You? Did you see me?" ejaculated Ashmole, the picture of amazement as Major Magnet curtly told him how he tried to learn from him how and where he had last seen Miss Bryer.

Although he knew Ashmole was playing a part for no good purpose, Major Magnet could not help giving him credit for almost perfect acting at this stage of the game.

"The wounds they gave me must have knocked me crazy," he at length declared, drawing a long, deep breath. "On my honor as a gentleman I can remember nothing of all this; I can recall nothing from the time I fell to the ground under their cruel blows until the train was once more in motion."

"Not even how you got on board?"

"Not even that, though I was told by a man who helped to bear me thither. Some of them caught the sounds of faint groans and in a body proceeded to investigate the cause. They found me, trying to get upon my feet, a mask of blood as he declared afterward.

"He said I seemed trying to tell them something about a young lady whom I must save, but as he was from the smoker, he knew nothing at the time about Miss Bryer. So they took me aboard and set about restoring my senses.

"They succeeded in this, and when we reached Durango I was almost myself once more. I dropped off the train at that point, and tried my level best to make amends for the cruel mistake I had fallen into. I had enlisted nearly a dozen good men for a campaign against the robbers, and wired several of my friends here to back up my efforts, when word came that Miss Bryer was safe in Animas with her father!"

"Of course you wired Mr. Bryer?"

"Of course, but he made no reply," with a look of mingled pain and uneasiness coming into his pale face. "That is why I sought you out, major, instead of going at once to his office or his boarding-place. I fear he blames me for all the suffering his daughter must have endured while in the clutches of those devils."

"Then you haven't heard from him at all?"

Ashmole shook his head dejectedly.

"Of course Mr. Bryer knew when his daughter was due here?"

"I think so—yes, I am almost positive I sent him word as soon as we knew that close connections could be made. But why do you ask? Surely he has not—he was at the depot to meet you?"

"I haven't seen him as yet, though I trust he has returned by this time. He must have been called out of town by important business, and detained longer than he anticipated."

Major Magnet was watching his caller very closely through all this, hoping to catch a clew or to at least discover something that could be used as a handle against this fellow, but without much success.

Ashmole seemed puzzled at first, and then an eager, hopeful light came into his eyes. But this was fully explained by his next words:

"Of course I deeply regret the disappointment this must have been to Rose, but I'm glad on my own account for— Major Magnet, dare I beg a further favor of you?"

"You ought to be the best judge of your capabilities, Mr. Ashmole. As for daring, I imagine you would dare almost anything."

Despite his firm resolve to "give him rope to hang himself," the major was unable to entirely conceal his dislike, if not suspicion, just then. To hear that scoundrel call his "little lady" by her given name after the crimes of which he had been guilty, was a feather too much.

Ashmole flushed a bit, but he was too eager in his aims to take offense where it could be ignored, and he hurriedly added:

"I owe you such a mighty debt of gratitude already, Major Magnet, that I'm ashamed to ask a further favor, but if you will go with me to where Miss Bryer is waiting for her father's coming, I'll never forget your kindness while life lasts."

"You want me to tell your story for you?"

"Not quite that bad," with a faint, fleeting smile. "All I ask is to once gain admittance to Rose. I fear she would decline to see me if I came unvouched for, but if you have other duties—"

"You would try to muster the courage?" laughed Major Magnet, taking his decision in that moment.

"I would beg her to receive me, if only long enough to hear my reasons for acting as I did, my excuse for permitting another to rescue her from those villains."

Although he had decided to grant this request, so far as to bear Ashmole company to the house, Major Magnet drooped his eyes and seemed busy with thought. Then he spoke, slowly:

"It is not a love scene I am expected to take a paternal part in, I trust, Ashmole?"

"Hardly that, though I don't mind admitting that it would be if I could have my own way. I love Rose Bryer, lately as I made her acquaintance, but I have no reason for hoping that she does or ever will look upon me as more than a servant in the employ of her father. Especially after this truly luckless event!" with a sigh as he rose to his feet.

"Of course it is none of my business, Ashmole," lightly said the major as they left the hotel and proceeded toward Mrs. Carver's boarding-house, "but I'm too old for anything in that vein, and so I wanted to feel my footing before I made the venture. As for backing up what you have to tell Miss Bryer, trust me for doing you full justice."

Creed Ashmole was profuse in his thanks. A great deal more than he would have been could he have read that sentence aright.

Major Magnet *did* intend doing him full justice, and if Rose Bryer failed to comprehend just what a thorough-paced scoundrel her recent escort had proved himself, it surely would not be the fault of the Man of Nerve.

Where each was so eager to take the plunge,

it did not consume a great deal of time in reaching the rather retired building over which the worthy Mrs. Carver held full sway, and as Ashmole hung back with sudden diffidence, Major Magnet briskly rung the bell.

The door was opened by a little smirking Chinaman, several of whom were employed by the landlady. The gentlemen were shown into the parlor by the Oriental, who silently glided away to announce their visit to his mistress.

There was a short delay, long enough for Ashmole to compose himself and for the major to feel a vague wonder and disappointment that his "little lady" had not met him, then Mrs. Carver sailed into the room, greeting them graciously.

"Miss Bryer hasn't ariz as yet," she said when the major asked for the young lady. "She was too restless to sleep or rest much yesterday, but she retired very early last night. She asked me to call her as soon as you came, major."

"Pray be so kind, Mrs. Carver, and bring word at once how the lady feels this morning," crisply uttered Magnet, taking a seat, a vague yet keen dread beginning to assail him.

And when, a few moments later, a scream came from above, and Mrs. Carver came rushing down-stairs to announce that Rose was missing, he leaped at the throat of Creed Ashmole, bearing him to the floor.

"You devil!" he gratingly cried. "This is some of your work!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAJOR TAKES AN OATH.

ALTHOUGH Creed Ashmole was a taller, larger, heavier man in all respects than his assailant, he went down before the major as though no more than a child in comparison.

It was part due to the sudden and unexpected assault, no doubt, but a giant could hardly have withstood the Man of Nerve in those moments so full of rage, so maddened by his sudden conviction that after all his care, the poor girl had fallen helplessly into the power of those who were plotting against her father's wealth, if no worse.

Mrs. Carver gave a gasping shriek of terror at the result of her words, and fled from the room in such blind haste that she stumbled over the grinning little Chinaman, fairly flattening him out with her mountainous weight before he could squirm from under her and take to his heels, leaving his mistress to rise as she might.

"Your work—more of your work, Creed Ashmole!" harshly growled Major Magnet, his sinewy fingers almost meeting through the flesh as they throttled the schemer.

Ashmole struggled with all his powers, but without avail. Taken so completely by surprise, thrown to the floor with a shock that fairly caused the house to tremble, with those fingers compressing his throat and those knees digging into his stomach, he was completely helpless from the very first.

Mrs. Carver regained her footing, cast one wild glance over her shoulder, to see that reddening, darkening face, with its staring eyes and protruding tongue, then fled once more, screaming murder at the top of her lungs!

"Don't you, Johnny—it's bloody murder!" she gasped, as she met her nearly-grown son as he came rushing from the dining-room, alarmed by her frantic cries.

She flung out her arms to check him, but Johnny ducked nimbly under them, gaining the parlor door, resolved to gratify his laudable curiosity at all hazards before aiding to spread the alarm.

Whether it was that wild uproar, or whether the sight of that awful countenance that first brought him to his senses, will never be known, but as Johnny gained the threshold, Major Magnet was rising from his half-dead captive, gripping his hands instead of his throat, rolling him over on his face, the more easily to secure his arms with the silk handkerchief which he jerked from his pocket.

"You hain't killed him, boss?" quavered the youth, ready to duck and take to flight in case this white-faced man should attempt to add his life to the score.

"No," came the crisp reply. "I've saved him for the hangman. You belong here?"

"Yes. I'm Johnny Carver. What's he done, mister?" curiosity overcoming personal fear and leading him into the room, though still on the alert and ready to defend his precious life with his nimble heels.

"Enough to lynch him a thousand times over, the cur!" gratingly cried Major Magnet, busily binding Ashmole's hands behind his back.

"Good Lawd!" gasped Johnny, starting back and tripping over the inquisitive little Chinaman. "I know him—git out, you!"

Once more the Oriental fled, narrowly escaping a vengeful toe.

"It's Mister Creed Ashmole!" finished Johnny, mechanically rubbing his bruises. "I've see'd him heaps o' times 'long o' Mister Bryer!"

Major Magnet finished his knots and rolled his captive over on his back, beginning to recover from that mad fit of passion, and to look something like his cool, nerry self.

"Take this, and go find Marshal Tolley as quick as you can, Johnny," he spoke, tossing a

gold coin to the startled youth. "Tell him that Major Magnet wants him here as swift as he can come. Don't say a word to any one else, or I'll have your scalp—sure!"

If Johnny heard that awful threat, he gave no signs. The gold coin was enough to send him out of the house without waiting for his hat or to take off his waiter's apron.

All this passed with great rapidity, but as Major Magnet turned once more toward his prisoner, he saw Creed Ashmole struggling to rise, gasping and cursing in the same breath.

A quick thrust of his foot sent the rascal back again, and holding him as a man might hold a crippled reptile, Major Magnet spoke sternly:

"Lie still, you cur! You're too utterly vile to be permitted to stand up in the presence of a white man!"

"Let up—I'll kill you!" gasped Ashmole, hoarsely.

"You've already more crimes than any one life can answer for," coldly interposed the major, increasing the pressure as Ashmole seemed regaining some of his bodily powers. "What have you done with Rose Bryer? How did you kidnap her from this house? Speak, you devil!"

Ashmole ceased his struggles and lay staring up into that pale, stern face as though this charge literally deprived him of speech.

Major Magnet laughed, short and harshly, but the sound was full of menace rather than mirth.

"You think to play the old game? Fool! I was only leading you on then, just to see how you would try to untangle yourself. I thought I had crippled you. I never once dreamed that you had again been at your dastardly work, or I'd have strangled you then and there—just as I came near strangling you a bit ago. But the thought of the hangman held back my hands in time."

"I don't—of what do you accuse me?" faintly, wonderingly asked Ashmole, seemingly forgetting all else for the moment.

"Of kidnapping Miss Rose Bryer, either with your own hands or in cahoot with the Muck-a-mucks."

"You are crazy! Or—have I gone mad?"

Major Magnet stooped and tore the white bandages from Ashmole's head, laughing harshly as his fingers failed to find a wound, unless a superficial scratch just at the edge of the hair above one temple might be called such.

"Gone crazy from the burts the train robbers gave you as you so desperately defended Miss Bryer, no doubt!" he laughed mockingly, as he rose erect, checking the effort made by Ashmole to free himself, throwing his weight upon the foot that pinned the unmasked plotter to the floor. "Bah! you more than fool! Was you so busy playing your own part that you could not see how I was acting? Now—tell me what has been done with Miss Bryer?"

Before Ashmole could make reply, even if he felt so inclined, the front door opened with a crash, and Johnny Carver came bounding in, followed closely by a tall, dark-bearded man, in whom Major Magnet at once recognized the city marshal, Richard Tolley.

"Here he is, boss!" panted the youth eagerly. "I run right up ag'inst him when I wasn't more'n—"

"You sent for me, major?" asked the officer, brushing Johnny aside and entering the parlor. "The boy said something about bloody murder, but of course I didn't place much dependence on him. What's the row?"

"He tried to murder me, Tolley!" cried Ashmole viciously. "I order you to take him in charge and to release me from—"

The sentence ended in an involuntary groan as Major Magnet brought his weight down, coolly turning to the officer and saying:

"I sent for you, Tolley. I ask you to take charge of this fellow, and keep him mighty close until I can enter charges against him. It will be sufficient to say that he took part in the wreck and attempted robbery of the Mail and Express night before last."

"A lie—vile and infamous lie!"

"I hope it'll prove to be a mistake, for your sake, sir," gravely said the marshal, lifting Ashmole to his feet as Major Magnet stepped aside. "The major is a responsible man. If he makes such a grave charge, I can't do less than take you in."

"Send the boy for a carriage at my expense, Tolley. He has more allies than one in town, and it won't do to risk a rescue. I'll stand all damages, you understand, if I can't make my charges stick."

Major Magnet tossed Johnny Carver another coin, and sent him off in delirious haste, making hay while the sun continued to shine, and only hoping he might get back before those precious drops ceased to fall within his reach.

Closing the door, shutting out the curious if frightened staff, including even the worthy landlady, Major Magnet hurriedly told Tolley quite sufficient to make him realize the full importance of keeping a firm grip on his prisoner.

Creed Ashmole vehemently denied everything until he saw that he was wasting his breath for naught. Then he lapsed into sullen silence, which endured until Johnny Carver came back with a close hack.

Ashmole, now seemingly calmed down and biding his time, quietly walked out and entered the carriage without making any resistance, but before the door closed upon him and the marshal he coldly said:

"See that you make your charges stick, Major Magnet, for when I've proven them without foundation, I'll kill you—unless you break your lying neck in running to get out of the way!"

Major Magnet paid not the slightest attention to this speech, simply bidding the marshal hold his prisoner until he could come to swear out a warrant against him.

"That will not be long, first. I want to look for some clew as to how the lady was kidnapped. Her father is out of town, and I'm about her only friend in Animas City."

"I'll hold him, never fear, major," nodded the officer, and then he gave the driver his instructions.

Major Magnet, outwardly as cool and composed as ever in his life, returned to the house, briefly apologizing to Mrs. Carver for the disturbance he had created.

"When you hear how that villain has persecuted Miss Bryer, you will forgive me, I know," he added, earnestly.

"And she a angel if ever there was one on this earth!" panted the worthy woman, one plump hand pressed against her side to quell "a stitch."

Major Magnet readily agreed with her on that point, then begged to hear what she could tell him about Rose. That was little of moment, but knowing as the past had taught him, how often valuable clews were to be found in the veriest trifles to the ordinary eye, he listened patiently, though burning to be at work.

As she had already stated, Rose found it difficult to get to sleep while the day lasted, though so greatly fatigued. She was worrying over her great disappointment in not finding her father as she had so fondly expected and anticipated.

But very soon after dusk she had retired, and a few minutes later when Mrs. Carver passed by the chamber, glancing in to add a good-night, she found Rose sleeping peacefully as a little child.

"I knowed it was what she wanted most, sir, and so kept all as quiet as I could this mornin', but I never once dreamt o' anythin' goin' wrong until—oh, dear!"

Major Magnet gently forced her to show him to the chamber which Rose had occupied, removing his hat as he entered with a curious awe, which he dared not analyze just then.

Closely as he searched, not a single clew was to be gained. All that he could be sure of was that Rose had dressed before leaving the chamber, since the clothes she had worn on the cars were not to be seen.

When his examination was finished, he left the house, making his way to swear out warrants against Creed Ashmole.

CHAPTER XXI.

CAPTAIN JUNIUS PROPOSES AN ELOPEMENT.

WITH a sudden sense of suffocation Rose Bryer opened her eyes on that night, to see a hideous face bending over her as she lay in bed.

"As you value your life be silent!" came a guarded voice, backed by a weapon that flashed in the dim lamplight as its keen point fairly pricked her fair throat.

It was a wonder the poor girl did not swoon outright, after such an awakening, and some such thought must have occurred to that masked intruder, for he pressed his broad palm still closer over her lips and hastened to render his warning still more emphatic.

"No tricks, fair lady, or your dear papa will be the worst sufferer for your tongue-wagging!"

Rose gave a start at these words, recalling as they did all her haunting doubts and fears for her father's safety. She forgot her own critical situation for the instant, and if her lips moved, it was to ask this grim mask for her parent, not to cry for help or pray for mercy.

"You're worrying about Father Bryer; is that it, dear?" asked the audacious intruder, seeming to read the truth in her eyes. "Well, the old gentleman is safe and sound at the present speaking. How much longer he will remain in that blissful condition, depends mainly upon his charming daughter and her capability of listening to and profiting by good, sound, stud-horse sense!"

There was no reply to this, unless in the maiden's eyes. She feared to even move her head, lest that grim visitor interpret it as an attempt to escape. And that keen point was beginning to dent her fair throat by its own weight.

"It's worse than barbarous to deprive a woman of the free use of her tongue, and I'll do so no longer," laughed the masked intruder, yet keeping that heavy hand across her lips while he added; "Still, it's no more than fair to tell you who and what I am before I set temptation before you, pretty."

"You and I ought to have met and formed acquaintance full four-and-twenty hours earlier than this. It was through no fault of mine that

this exquisite pleasure was postponed until now, or that father and daughter are still divided.

"Men call me a thief, footpad, train-wrecker and outlaw in general. You may know me better some day, but for the present pray receive me as Captain Junius, the man of mystery."

As he pronounced that title, with something in his tones and manner that lent the impression he was really proud of his name and evil reputation, the masked intruder withdrew his hand, though standing ready to quickly stifle any attempt at dangerous outcry which the poor girl might make.

"My father—tell me of him!" gasped Rose, that question still overshadowing all else.

"You were woefully disappointed at not finding him at the depot to welcome you?" laughed the masked outlaw, removing that glittering weapon from her throat, carelessly testing its point with his thumb as he added: "A prior engagement detained him, and unfortunately he was unable to find a messenger to relieve your natural fears. Now, he sends you kindly greeting by my lips. If I was an honest man instead of a thief and rascal in general, I'd add a kiss."

Rose shrank away, more frightened by that lightly mocking manner, than she had been by the threats and touch of the steel.

For the first time she began to realize her own peril.

"A little hard, isn't it, angel of light?" laughed Captain Junius, placing his own interpretation on that action. "After all you passed through, after all the noble efforts of the gallant major—to see that the villain still pursues her! And more bitter still: that said villain bath a mighty tight sinch upon his precious game, too!"

Rose shivered, but durst not attempt to reply just then. She listened as intently as possible, but the house seemed wrapped in slumber, and nothing came to give her even the faintest hope of escaping from the grip of this malicious demon.

The lamp was dimly burning on the dresser. The door was closed, the blinds drawn, just as she had left them before retiring.

"Down the chimney, and then through the keyhole, Miss Bryer—how else?" mocked the High Muck-a-muck, as he followed those half bewildered glances. "If I could take you out by the same route, I'd hardly be palaverin' like this, to give you time in which to fairly recover your scattered wits. Angelic though you doubtless are, mentally and morally speaking, I fear you are too material physically for such a flitting."

"What is it you expect of me?" asked Rose, crushing back her growing fears, nerving herself to face the worst.

"Blind obedience first, last, all the time," came the prompt response. "When you are fully prepared to yield this, I'll get down to plain business. Until then—"

"If it is money that you seek, what I have lies—"

"In my pocket, deary," laughingly interrupted the outlaw, tapping that receptacle as he spoke. "If said pocket had only been capacious enough, I believe I might have tucked you away in one corner, and carried you on a journey to the moon, without causing an eyelid to twinkle twice! As a sleeper, you out-class the famous seven!"

A faint, indistinct sound came to her ears, as the High Muck-a-muck ceased speaking, and Rose caught her breath with sudden hope. Surely some one had heard the sound of that cruel voice, and was investigating its meaning!

Captain Junius also caught the sound, for with a swift motion, he brought that glittering blade almost in contact with her throat, a revolver in his other hand, as he faced toward the closed door.

"Pray it's a false alarm, for rather than let you slip me now—off comes your head!" muttered Captain Junius in guarded tones.

For a brief space all was silence. No further sound came from beyond that closed door, and if imagination had not played them both a trick, the dawning suspicions had died away before extending as far as their door.

"Lucky for you that it wasn't anything more dangerous than a prowling rat," grimly uttered the High Muck-a-muck as he turned that ugly mask squarely toward the pale, frightened maiden. "I've cast my little all on this die, and if I'm fated to lose, you go down with me."

"What have I done to—"

"It isn't what you have done nearly so much as what you're going to do, that interests me most just as present," was the curt interruption. "You've had plenty of time in which to rally from the shock this unceremonious visit must have caused you. Now I'll get down to plain business without any more frills."

"I've already told you who and what I am. I'm on the make, of course, and as I risk my neck with every hour spent as the chief of the Muck-a-mucks, I naturally place my figures 'way up. So much by way of preliminary."

"Your father is a rich man, and has a mine that will in time make him a hundred-fold richer. Such a bright and shining mark couldn't well be missed by men of my caliber, and I

scooped the old gentlemen in. He is in the hands of my men, awaiting my return, when his true value will be appraised.

"Naturally all this is a little inconvenient for him, but to do him simple justice, the thought of losing a slice of his wealth doesn't bother him nearly so much as his yearning for you, his one ewe lamb."

"Papa—dear papa!" moaned the tortured girl, forgetting self in her fears for him. "Take me to him—let me share his fate!"

"That's precisely what brought me here to-night, Miss Bryer," laughed the outlaw, his eyes gleaming with grim satisfaction at his success. "Your father seemed so wretched as he pictured your arrival here, a stranger in a strange land, that I took pity on him and offered to act as your escort to his present place of rustication. Are you ready to go with me at once?"

Rose shrank back, her great eyes filled with fresh terror.

"Understand me, Miss Bryer," added Captain Junius in cold, hard tones. "I shall not stoop so low as to use force. If that had been part of my scheme, I should have bound and gagged you at the start. If you go with me of your own accord, well and good. If you refuse—I will apologize to you for this uninvited visit, and leave you to repose—unless you prefer to pass the hours in composing a fitting epitaph for the tombstone of Keene Bryer!"

"Spare him—my poor father!" moaned the maiden.

"His fate lies wholly in your hands, my dear," with a softening of his tones and manner. "Say that you will arise and dress yourself in good faith, and I'll leave the room. But please keep steadily in mind that if the house is alarmed by any act on your part, and I am forced to leave without your company, your father will be the prime sufferer. Please accept that as a caution, not a threat."

"But—Major Magnet said father was to return in the morning," faltered Rose, her poor brain growing more and more bewildered.

"Major Magnet lied—for your peace and serenity of mind, maybe, knowing how sorely you required rest after what you had passed through by the way, but still a lie. Keene Bryer is in my power. For himself he will not yield an inch. With you before his eyes, he'll bend. We'll get gold, you two will get freedom, which ought to be more welcome than the rope or a bloody grave. And such will be his fate if you refuse to elope with me, Rose Bryer!"

"I will go. Only spare me as much as possible," faintly uttered the poor girl, abandoning all hope.

"That of course," placing his knife in his belt. "I'll be just outside the door, and don't forget that I have ears keen as those of a hawk. If you try to play cunning—good-by Keene Bryer!"

With those words Captain Junius left the chamber, leaving the door slightly ajar, and keeping one hand hold of it in such a manner that his fingers remained plainly visible to his trembling victim within. So long as she saw that, he felt there would be little risk of her attempting to escape his power.

Almost like one in a dream the poor girl slipped from the bed and began putting on her clothes as rapidly as her trembling hands could accomplish the task. She had thoughts only for her father, just then. After those devilish threats, she never once gave thought to her own peril or future.

When fully dressed in the same garments which she had worn when on the train, Rose fastened her bonnet and with a light, noiseless step crossed the room to touch those visible fingers as a mute signal that she was in readiness for the next step.

Captain Junius quickly opened the door, his eyes glowing through his mask, grim approval in his voice as he greeted her:

"Good enough, Miss Bryer! Heap better than I expected, for which I pray you accept my heartfelt thanks. Provided, of course, that you are to continue in the same reasonable path."

"You will take me to my father?" faltered Rose, striving to read the truth in those gleaming eyes. "You are not deceiving me?"

"On my honor as a professional rogue, Miss Bryer!" bowed the High Muck-a-muck, taking her hand and holding it firmly in his broad palm. "Subject to unforeseen drawbacks, of course. But if I live long enough, you shall see your father, and learn from his lips that I have told you nothing more than the simple truth."

Holding her thus, he put out the light, then silently stole from the chamber and down-stairs. A dim light was burning there, and Rose caught sight of a shadowy figure stealing silently toward them.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SMOOTH-TONGUED SCOUNDREL.

AT that sight a sudden hope leaped up, and for a single breath she fancied this must be Major Magnet, once more coming to her rescue. But Captain Junius seemed to read her thoughts through the touch of her trembling hand, and he laughed softly as he uttered:

"Don't think it, my dear. It's only Rats, the Chinaman. A mighty valuable rascal in his

way, else your landlady and her guests wouldn't be slumbering so very soundly just at present."

Even as he spoke Rose recognized the little vessel-faced Oriental who served Mrs. Carver as cook, and her new-born hopes died.

The Chinaman opened the hall door for their passage, and Captain Junius dropped a few coin into his yellow claws before crossing the threshold.

"I'd rather slit your throat, Rats, but a bargain is a bargain, and no man living can say that the High Muck-a-muck of Animas ever went back on his word. Keep a still tongue in your head, John, or you may lose them both when the racket gets wind!"

Drawing a hand through his arm, the outlaw led his captive out of the yard and around the corner, turning their backs on the more thickly-settled portion of the town.

"Don't think that we've got to hoof it all the way, my dear young lady," he said, with a light laugh as the house faded into indistinctness behind them. "Keene Bryer might kick if I brought you to him in a damaged condition. And I've had too much work already not to get the highest market price for my wares!"

Rose made no reply. She moved like one in a waking dream. A dull, strange stupor seemed to fall over her brain. Just then she could hardly have made an effort to escape, had a way opened for her.

"Do you know, little one, that you're a marvel?" persisted Captain Junius, as he more leisurely led his victim through the night. "I expected to have more bother than you could shake a stick at in a month of Sundays, while here you are leading like a lamb to—I wish I might say altar, but Little Firefly would kick up the devil's delight at anything of that sort—worse luck me!"

Shortly after this they reached a little grove of trees, from the shade of which several horses and men came forth in answer to the low whistle vented by the High Muck-a-muck. One of the animals bore a side-saddle, plainly intended for the reception of Rose Bryer.

"Your foot, little lady—so!" said the outlaw chief, as he deftly raised his captive to the saddle. "That's heap better than walking, any night, but don't thank me too awfully; it will all be charged for in the bill when rendered."

Vaulting upon a big black horse, he placed himself alongside that ridden by Rose, taking her hitch-strap in his hand as they moved along.

Besides himself there were two outlaws, one of whom kept a few yards to the rear, while the other acted as a sort of advance guard, though there could be little to fear at that late hour of the night, once the town was fairly cleared.

Captain Junius was in high spirits at the success which had fallen upon his bold efforts, and his smooth tongue rattled on almost unceasingly, whenever the nature of the ground permitted anything like ease of conversation.

He laughingly referred to the botch he and his men had made of the attack on the train, and gave Major Magnet full credit for the adroit manner in which he had pulled the wool over their eyes.

"If I had him as a lieutenant, there'd be nothing too good for us in all the silver country," he declared, boastfully.

This allusion to the gallant gentleman who had served her so well, by no means tended to lighten the heart of the poor child. What would he think when he called to see her in the morning? Would he be able to penetrate the mystery of her disappearance? Would he think she had run away, possibly with her brain unbinged by all she had undergone of late? Or would he know that these terrible wretches were at the bottom of it all?

Glib though his tongue, and seemingly so fond of listening to its workings, even Captain Junius soon wearied of receiving no answer from his captive, and then they traveled steadily, silently through the night and up to the growing light in the far east.

When day had fairly dawned, Captain Junius called a halt.

"We're safe enough from all pursuit, even if the gallant major can unriddle your midnight fitting, Miss Bryer," he said as he aided Rose to leave her saddle. "And you're too precious a commodity to be unnecessarily tried. A hot cup of coffee will brighten those pretty eyes of yours most amazingly!"

The two Muck-a-mucks fell to work, speedily kindling a fire and preparing a hot meal, rude but sufficient. Meat was roasted over the coals, and a small pot of strong coffee was made for their chief and his fair captive, the two privates contenting themselves with water and a finishing sup from their pocket-flasks.

Rose at first declined both food and drink, but Captain Junius persisted—insisted might seem a better word—and after the first taste, she both ate and drank freely.

"It is what you need the most, my dear, and before you take saddle again I expect no less than that you'll be wearying your tongue in singing my praises for insisting. We have quite—The devil!"

He sprung to his feet with half-drawn pistol at the sound of a swift footfall, only to fall

back with evident amazement as a lithe, graceful figure leaped through the bushes to stand half-defiant, half-pleadingly before him.

"Not the old gentleman, but one of his imps, daddy!" audaciously cried Little Firefly, flashing a quick look toward Rose.

Though dressed so differently, and in a style more befitting her sex, Rose instantly recognized the girl, and forgetting all save that she was one of her own sex, she uttered a choking cry as her arms extended, to receive Little Firefly the next instant.

"You can't scold me after this, daddy!" with tears dimming her bright eyes as her rosy cheek rested gently on the head that hid its pale face in her bosom. "The lady needs one of her own sex, and if you send me off, I'll take her with me!"

Captain Junius himself seemed touched by the sobs of his captive, for the hot words that leaped to his lips were choked back without utterance, and knowing that her trick was forgiven, Little Firefly devoted herself to soothing Rose.

She drew the maiden to one side, sitting down beside her, talking soft and low, assuring Rose that no harm should come her while she had power to interpose. And then, when Rose asked about her father, Little Firefly did all that lay in her power to comfort her.

If she said more than the truth, it was through no love of lying, with a kindly purpose that went far toward blotting out the sin.

Shortly after the coming of Little Firefly, the journey was resumed, one of the Muck-a-mucks riding far enough in advance to spring any possible trap before it could involve those who followed. Although he had little dread of any such, Captain Junius valued his present prize far too highly to run even that remote risk without guarding against it as far as lay in his power.

Rose was Little Firefly's companion for the rest of the journey, and under the gay, spirited, yet sympathizing talk of the girl, her own spirits rose many degrees and brought with it something of her native courage and strength of nerve.

It was well that this was so, for a terrible shock awaited the poor girl when that long, weary journey came to an end. For when they were fairly within the secluded valley where the Muck-a-muck of Animas were then quartered, and she begged to be taken at once to her dear father, Captain Junius put on an air of amazement as he cried:

"Your father? Did you really expect to find him here, Miss Bryer?"

"You said—God in Heaven!" lifting her eyes and her rigidly interlocked hands upward as the words broke from her lips: "Strike this foul liar dead, I beseech Thee!"

Bold, evil man though he was, Captain Junius shrunk back from that passionate outburst, awed and disconcerted. But when that fictitious strength suddenly failed the poor girl, and she fell face downward on the bare ground, his natural audacity returned, and catching her up in his arms he bore her into the little hut where his daughter stood.

And when Little Firefly had restored Rose to consciousness, he spoke coldly:

"If I told you that, Rose Bryer, I'll make my words good. I swear that Keene Bryer shall come here to share your captivity!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNEXPECTED ASSISTANCE.

"How much can he prove? How will it end?"

Over and over those two questions were revolved in the busy brain of the young man who had so recently stood high in the estimation of his fellow-citizens, but who was now lying in a prison cell, under charges so serious that they might well bring him to a shameful death at the end of a rope—so ordered by Judge Lynch, if not by an official with a more legal title.

"That'd be worse even than his fingers, curse him!"

About his throat were the marks still—fingers painted in dull colors—and bitter were his curses against the man who had branded him thus.

It was a dark night, but Creed Ashmole thought not of sleep, though his moments of mental rest had been few and far between since the word of Major Magnet sent him there, to await the punishment befitting his crimes.

Through the heavily-barred window in one side of his cell, he caught the twinkle of tiny stars.

They seemed so much further away than when he had gazed up at them last—when he was a free man!

"How much did he hear that night? Did he suspect the part I was playing? Could he have stolen back, and listened to us talking? If I only knew! If I could only see how heavily he is armed!"

He sprung to his feet, and paced feverishly back and forth; three steps one way, three the other. He could not sit still, more than he could sleep. It was as though the spirit of a wolf or hyena had taken the place of his soul.

"If I had only known as much then—when

he knelt over me, when he tried to restore me to my senses, that I might tell him what had become of Rose! If I had only known what was to be!"

His right hand clinched, and went through the motions of stabbing.

"Fool! Besotted fool that I did not kill him then and there, as I felt tempted! The deed would have been laid to the Muck-a-muck. No person could even have suspected me, much less brought me to the bar to answer for his death!"

He stopped short in his pantherish strides, staring up at the iron-crossed window. He made a leap and caught the bars in his hands, drawing his face upward until he could gaze forth, his bloodshot eyes roving wildly over the ground as far as the thick wall would permit. And the groan that broke from his parched lips, as he dropped to the floor, once more turned into a vicious curse against his faithless allies.

"What are their oaths worth now? Why don't he come with his men and set me free? Because—because he'd rather keep my share with his own!"

Creed Ashmole flung himself down on the narrow cot, hiding his face on his folded arms, shivering, trembling like one with an ague chill, for the thousandth time since his incarceration abandoning all hope, feeling that a shameful death or even more bitter enslavement for life awaited him.

He was already paying the terrible penalty of crime, and though he might live a prisoner, a convict, until his hair turned white as snow, he would never experience more terrible hours than those he lived through while his fate hung in the balance.

And yet it could not be said that he repented. His grief was all for himself, not for his sins. And all he asked was restored liberty so that he could be bitterly avenged on his enemies—on his pretended friends who failed him in this, his hour of need.

"What is an oath to him?" he moaned, turning on his back and fixing his feverish gaze on those tiny sparks through the window. "What does he care how I suffer, just so he reaps the full benefit of my busy plotting? Yet—come, you devil!" leaping to his feet and lifting his tightly clinched hands above his head in fierce menace. "Come and set me free, or I'll tell all—I'll give you and yours away to that human bloodhound! I'll yield up the secret he is so greedy for! Come, you cur! Come—come and set me free!"

This was one of the wildest fits that had seized upon him since he was committed to jail to stand trial on the charges preferred by Major Magnet, and it was the first time he had even to himself hinted that he would avow his connection with Captain Junius of the Muck-a-mucks. Ever up to then he had stubbornly maintained his complete ignorance of the evil gang, his complete innocence of the evil deeds attributed to him.

Want of sleep, lack of rest: these forces were at work, and bade fair to unsettle his brain unless a change came right speedily.

That change was nearer far than Creed Ashmole dared hope for.

Even as those fierce threats came hissing hot over his lips, a dark figure was gazing up as though to make sure of his window. Then, with a deft toss, a couple of pebbles shot upward, one to enter and fall at the feet of the prisoner, the other to clink against the iron bar and drop back to its sender.

Creed Ashmole started, his eyes dilated, his nostrils quivering, his tall form crouching and shivering like a leaf as he listened and watched for what was to follow. Or—was it only part of his growing insanity? Was it a lie like—

With a sound rattling in his throat at this fearful doubt, Creed Ashmole sprang upward and grasped the iron bars, lifting his face and trying to crowd it through the narrow openings to gain a wider scope for his fevered glare.

And as he did so, a human face suddenly rose before him, with so little space between that their breath fairly mingled!

"Stiddy, pardner!" came in husky notes from that apparition as the prisoner gasped aloud with mingled surprise and joy. "Ef you kick up a hobberty big 'nough fer to roust out the guards, it's good-by you an' skin out me!"

"You come—to set me free?" hoarsely panted Ashmole, his bodily powers almost failing him as he caught a faint gleam of hope.

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe t'otherwise. Ef you're the sort o' crook Major Magnet says you be, why—"

"I'm not—I'm innocent of all that he charges me with!" feverishly declared Ashmole, his brain whirling until he could only make out a dull blur where a friendly face had but a moment before existed.

"Then good-by, John!" surlily growled the fellow on the outside. "'Twasn't nigh so much to set you free as to score a grudge ag'in' that durned sport as I come up hyar. Ef you was what he says—"

"I am—I am all that, and more too!" huskily interrupted Ashmole, his face sinking lower by degrees as his strength failed him.

"Fu'st no, now yes! One is a lie; which?"

"I lied—I'm a crook. I'm all that human devil swore to. Now set me free unless you want to set me die like a dog!" panted Ashmole, now hanging at the full length of his arms.

"Tell me your name an' I'll know better what to do, pardner," hesitated the man on the outside, perched on his rude support so securely that he could free a hand to dubiously comb his tangled beard as he strained his eyes to catch sight of the prisoner's face below.

Struggling for calmness, feeling that his last faint hope lay in convincing this man of his truth and complete trust, Creed Ashmole gave his name and the charges placed against him by Major Magnet.

"I reckon it's all right," said the man without, nodding his shaggy head with sudden decision. "I'll run the resk, anyhow, jest fer luck. It'll bite the durned critter deep 'nough to smart, anyway!"

Creed Ashmole dropped to the floor of his cell, too weak to even stand without leaning against the wall. He would be set free—free to wreak a bitter revenge on that human bloodhound! Free to complete the master game of his life!

He never doubted that, now. For over his head he could hear the mouse-like gnawing as a keen saw rapidly ate its way through the rust-covered bars which alone barred him from liberty.

"I say, pardner!" came guardedly from the man at the window.

"Yes—Heaven bless you!"

"Stiddy, you! Don't sling words o' that caliber this way ef you ain't hungry to see me tumble an' break the durned ole neck o' me! I jest wanted to hint that I'd got 'nother saw, ef you wasn't too tired to use it."

Already beginning to feel more like his old self, Creed Ashmole sprang into life and action. He knew that his cot was strong enough to bear his weight while standing upright, for he had used it more than once to gain a look through his window. And now he moved it so that he could aid in that joyous work, his face nearly on a level with that of the stranger from whom this unexpected assistance came.

"Dick Tolley an' the rest don't look to be over wide awake, but ye can't always count on 'pearances," chuckled the stranger as he passed a steel saw through to those eager fingers. "An' the sooner the job is jobbed, the surer you'll be o' cheatin' the rope, pardner!"

"Who are you? You come from the chief?"

"You kin call me Hank Burlap, an' never tell a lie, pardner," his hairy paws rapidly working the well-oiled bit of steel. "An' the main p'int is this: it'll hurt Major Magnet fer to let you slip through his fingers!"

"He'd rather lose his left hand!" flashed Ashmole, keeping time with his saw on the second bar, growing stronger, cooler, more his old self as he saw escape coming nearer and nearer.

"Then that's why I come to lend ye a hand," nodded the other, his teeth clicking viciously. "I've hed it in fer the major this many a long year, but I never ketched a chaine fer to let him hev a taste ontel I hearn o' you an' this snap."

"I'll never forget it—I'll never know rest untel I have repaid you a thousand-fold!"

"Talk's mighty cheap," was the dry comment. "It takes money to buy good whisky."

"Name your terms—say what you want most when I am once more a free man under the stars—and if I fail you, 'twill be from lack of means, not through ingratitude," earnestly uttered Ashmole, stopping his work long enough to catch and ardently press the hand of his new-found friend.

"It's writ down in the mind o' me, pard," nodded Hank Burlap.

At the time those words were spoken, Creed Ashmole undoubtedly felt and meant all he said; how it would be when he had once more tasted the sweets of freedom, was quite a different thing.

Although the bars were strong and sound, despite their coating of rust, Hank Burlap came well provided, and their fingers were tireless while aught remained for them to accomplish. Steadily the keen saws ate their way through the bars. Each was cut clear through at the bottom, and more than half-way at the top, when steady pressure bent them aside so that a man of Ashmole's size could readily crowd his body through the aperture.

"I'll go fu'st, pardner," whispered Burlap, stowing away the tools and preparing to descend. "Ef all's clear, I'll make a motion—so!"

How eagerly Creed Ashmole watched for that signal, and how quickly he responded to it by crawling out of his cell and climbing down the rude ladder, may be easily guessed. And grasping that hand he said:

"I owe you more than life, dear friend! How can I ever repay you?"

"You can't stop nigh hyar—take me to the den o' the Muck-a-mucks an' vouch fer me as a solid crook, an' we'll call it squar'!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HANK BURLAP'S REWARD.

CREED ASHMOLE gave a slight shiver as he heard that request, and the hot blood leaping

through his veins seemed to grow cold as ice-water for a brief space.

Even with his liberty trembling in the balance—for his escape from that cell might be discovered with any moment—a fierce suspicion flashed into his brain.

Was this a cunning snare set for him by Major Magnet? Had he sent this man to set him free, only to gain full knowledge of the secret which he had striven by other means to twist from his sullen lips?

"I ain't axin' too much, be I, pardner?" added Burlap, drawing back a little and with a half-injured echo in his voice. "Ef you didn't lie to me up yender you're a crook. So be I. This town won't be healthy fer you, nur yit fer me the when the major comes to know you're foot-free ag'in. So—ef you're really grateful fer my doin's, I ax you to give me a fa'r chaine fer to git on my feet ag'in. I'm bu'sted, flat!"

"I thought I heard a sound from inside," muttered Ashmole, with a nervous glance over his shoulder. "What was it you asked, my friend?"

"It'll keep ontel we're in a safer spot then this, I reckon," curtly replied Hank Burlap, moving away from the jail. "Ef you want to see jest how white I'm playin' of ye, come along a little fuder."

This advice was too good to be neglected, and Creed Ashmole followed hard upon the footsteps of his guide, only beginning to breathe freely when the gloomy jail was lost to sight as he cast his backward glances.

Hank Burlap seemed miffed by that hesitation, though it had been covered over fairly well, and spoke not a word as he strode along by the darkest, most secluded ways, quickly leaving the town behind them.

Almost like one in a dream Creed Ashmole followed his lead, trying to steady his whirling brain, trying to either banish or confirm that sudden suspicion.

Was it only a cunning scheme to get at the truth? Was Major Magnet willing to aid his escape, to postpone his vengeance, on the chance of learning where Rose Cryer had been taken by the High Muck-a-muck?

Was Hank Burlap the chosen tool, through whom he hoped to learn all this? Was he trying to get an introduction into the band, vouched for by one whom Captain Junius could not doubt, simply to in the end betray them to his employer?

All this seemed hardly credible, but he was ready to believe almost anything of the man whose fingers had branded his throat.

"Thar!" ejaculated Hank Burlap as they left the town fairly behind them. "Feels mighty like I'd jerked the blessed neck o' me right out o' a closin' noose! An' now, pardner, mebbe you've hed time to make up your mind to say yes or no to what I axed ye back yon'."

"You want me to vouch for you to the gang called Muck-a-mucks?"

"That, or any other outfit whar they's a chaine fer a good man to make a honest livin' without too mighty much hard work," nodded Burlap. "'Course I wouldn't ax it ef I didn't know you was a crook your own self, nur yit ef I hedn't done somethin' to prove that I'm on your side o' the corral fence. Not that I want to rub that in—it ain't my way, pardner. Ef you've forgot so mighty soon what you said when the bars was still hull—drap it all!"

A flush of shame flooded the face of the escaped prisoner, and he hastily cried as he caught the hand of his rescuer, gripping it hard:

"It wasn't through any doubts of you, my friend, but I can hardly realize that I'm a free man—free to help even myself, much less another. I swear to you that is all!"

"Then it's a whack!" with a relieved laugh as he contracted his sinewy fingers until Ashmole's knuckles cracked under the pressure. "An' now we'll mosey on. Walkin' makes me mighty tired, an' I don't do so mighty much of it 'long's they's a hoss to be lifted—bet your sweet life, pardner!"

"You have horses, then?"

"A couple, good as I could pick up in a hurry," nodded Burlap, with a broad grin over his shoulder at that surprised air. "They say ridin' makes corns, but I'd heap ruther hev 'em thar then on my trotters. An' when the chaine come in my way—well, it runs in the family. An' it come 'long o' that same complaint I got sech a hot grudge ag'inst the devil as calls hisself Major Magnet—devil toast him crisp!"

Little by little those wild suspicions were fading away, and by the time they had reached the point where Hank Burlap had concealed the stolen horses, Creed Ashmole was almost ready to believe him simply what he claimed to be: a born rascal, bent on spiting Major Magnet for some real or fancied wrong committed in the past.

Almost—but not quite!

"Thar's the critters, pardner," grinned Burlap, with a wave of his hand as the covert was reached. "Mebbe you're used to better, but I've resked the rope to lift many a wuss 'un. Thar they be. Take your pick an' I'll take the leavin's. 'Cause why: from now on you're the boss an' I'm jest the yaller dog under the wagon."

Ashmole demurred a little at this, but Hank Burlap would have it that way.

"It was my lead back yender, pardner, while you was onable to help your own self, but things is heap sight different now. I'm lookin' to you fer a lift, wuth pritty nigh as much to me as my help was to you a bit ago. Ef you play off onto me, I'm jest a loose boss-thief, clean bu'sted in pocket an' 'thout any backin'."

"I have no money with me. They took everything away when they shut me up," hesitated Ashmole.

"Durn the money now—what I wants heap more is a snug place whar I kin draw a free breath, knowin' that ef I'm hit, others'll hit back while I'm gittin' a good ready myself—see?"

"I see. I'll do my level best for you, and still remain in your debt for this night's work," quickly replied Ashmole, taking the nearest horse and leaping lightly into the saddle.

Hank Burlap followed his example, laughing lightly as they turned their faces toward the distant mountains and rode away.

"You'd never make a livin' at lifting stock, pardner, ef you hain't no keener judgment than that! This critter is wuth double what yourn would fetch in open market."

For some little time they rode on in silence, Ashmole busy once more with those haunting doubts and suspicions. If Hank Burlap was indeed in the employ of Major Magnet, he played his role to perfection.

Presently and of his own accord, Burlap began to explain why he held such a powerful antipathy to Major Magnet, but his tongue was nimble and his diversions many, so that a verbatim recital would occupy more space than can be spared at this stage of my story.

Enough that it was an evil record which he laid bare, and the end of one brother was brought about by and through the major.

"Hung him—hung my brother like he was a sheep-killin' cur!"

That was a ride which Creed Ashmole was fated never to forget while he drew the breath of life. Not that it was so eventful, for they never met a mortal being or heard a sound which could come from mortal man. But through it all, up to the hour when Hank Burlap called a halt as the sun began to gild the eastern sky, he was fighting with his deadly suspicions.

If he could only settle the question one way or the other! If he could only feel certain that this man, who had seemingly risked so much to rescue him from a shameful punishment, was either fish or flesh!

"I don't know what you feel like, boss, but I'm holler clean down to the toes o' my brogans!" grinned Burlap, as he dismounted and took an old sack from where it was tied behind his saddle. "An' ef hunger is good sass, we'll think we're feedin' on the fat o' the land 'stead o' sow-belly an' hard-tack!"

Creed Ashmole smiled very strangely as he alighted.

"You are very thoughtful, pardner, and I'm mighty lucky, that is a fact. I am hungry. I don't believe I've eaten a dozen bites since they locked me up."

"All the more reason why I want to make a holy haste right now," nodded Burlap, as he gathered material for a fire.

Before long they were eating heartily, and Ashmole laughed as he leaned over to slip one of the revolvers from his companion's belt.

"You have two, and I'll just borrow one until we get to the gang."

The meal ended, Burlap stamped out the embers to guard against the fire spreading. And as he turned his back, Creed Ashmole quickly lifted that stolen pistol, sending a heavy bullet crashing through the skull of the man to whom he owed even more than life.

CHAPTER XXV.

FORCED INACTION.

"WHAT is it, major? The same old story? There is nothing new?"

"Only that we are so many hours nearer the glad ending, my friend," was the gentle yet hopeful reply as Major Magnet paused to grip that unsteady hand before seating himself.

Only two days had passed since the discovery was made that Rose Bryer had vanished in the night, but that comparatively brief period had wrought many and great changes in both men. The Man of Nerve showed this least, but something of the truth was written upon his face.

He held complete mastery over his voice, and he could force a smile at will, but even he could not mask those lines imprinted by the touch of care, fear and almost despair.

Keene Bryer bowed his face upon his arms as they crossed on the desk before him. A single groan escaped his lips, then he suffered on in silence; only Major Magnet could even begin to realize how terribly he had and was even then suffering.

Something of his anxiety and grief the rest of the world might guess at, from his unnaturally pale face and the dark circles growing around his sunken eyes; but they never saw his tears, never heard his suppressed sobs, nor felt that without a change for the better should come

right speedily, the Muck-a-mucks would have still another life to answer for on the day of judgment.

Major Magnet said no more, just then. He knew that words of his could have no good effect until after that pent up grief should spend itself for the hour. Only one word could have cured it; and that word he had no power to utter.

Two days!

They seemed more like two ages as Major Magnet turned his mind backward and reflected on all that had been done, constantly questioning himself if aught had been overlooked, aught neglected, the doing of which might have bettered their case.

He could see no point which might have been strengthened. Everything had been done that man might do, unless guided by more perfect knowledge than lay at their disposal.

"You have seen that devil—that Ashmole again?" asked Keene Bryer, lifting his haggard face from his arms.

"Not since yesterday," said Major Magnet, with a grave shake of his head.

"You offered him—everything?"

"Too much, I'm afraid," with a sudden darkening of his pale face.

"No price is too much to pay!" flashed the father, almost fiercely.

"Not if the bargain could be made, you mean, my friend," calmly spoke the other.

"The whole world would be cheap, then. But what I mean is this: I fear Ashmole thinks he's still on top; that it is for him to dictate and us to submit."

"I care not—all I ask is my little girl back again!"

"That wish shall be gratified if I live, Keene Bryer," steadily spoke the Man of Nerve. "I swear this—I give you my honor that I'll wrest Rose Bryer from those devils in human shape, or I'll die."

Earnest though that vow was, it failed to bring even a shade of light to the haggard face of the bereaved father. So long as he had a tangible clew to cling to, so long would he fight hard and fearlessly. But there was none left—absolutely none!

Creed Ashmole sullenly denied knowing aught of the outrage, and no threats, prayers or rewards could shake him from the stand he had taken at the outset. All of these had been tried. Keene Bryer visited him in his cell and swore that the past should be blotted out, so far as he was concerned; that no punishment should be imposed which his power or influence could avert; that he would enrich the man who told him where to look for his idolized daughter.

Always the same answer; knowing naught, he could confess nothing.

Besides Creed Ashmole, Wing Lee, the little weasel-faced Oriental at Mrs. Carver's boarding-house, was the only other in Animas City who could have explained the mystery. And for his own sake, "Rats" kept his lips tight locked as he covertly jingled the golden coins in his baggy trousers—the price of treachery and a wise knowledge of drugs.

Major Magnet had spoken closer to the truth than he had dared hope when he promised Rose that her father would return to Animas City on the day following her arrival. He did return, a little after noon on that day, to receive the sorest blow of all his life.

In hopes of gaining a clew of some sort from his experience, Major Magnet questioned him closely, as soon as the first numbing shock was over; but there was little to tell.

Keene Bryer had been called out of town on business. Considerable money or money's worth was involved, but that consideration would have been as nothing in comparison had he known that his child was due at Animas City on that date.

"He promised to wire me when to look for them, but he never kept his word. I thought some little matters of my poor girl had delayed their start, and knew I would be back before they could get here, even should the dispatch come before I had cleared the outskirts of the town," explained the mine-owner.

This was one of the points on which Major Magnet questioned Creed Ashmole, but with scant satisfaction. He swore that he had sent the promised dispatch. If it had not been delivered, the fault was not his.

Strong in the belief that this kidnapping was but a continuation of the bold attempt already made by the Muck-a-mucks under lead of Captain Junius, Major Magnet acted on that belief. He sent skilled and cunning trailers out into the hills and mountains, bidding them hunt for sign, for the hiding-places of the outlaws.

It was a forlorn hope, but with that father suffering untold agony, what else could he do? At least this would be assemblance of activity, and without even a grain of hope to feed upon, he feared that Keene Bryer would give way beneath that awful strain.

"I think it may do good if we keep away from Ashmole for a day or two," at length said the major, a thoughtful light in his steel-gray eyes. "If nothing else, it will make him fear we have determined to get along without his aid: and perhaps if he believes that, he'll grow a little more anxious to talk white."

"Wait—wait—nothing but wait!" groaned Keene Bryer, once more burying his face on his arms, his frame shivering with the bitter agony which he strove to smother.

"We have already done about all mortal men can do, my friend," the major said, gravely. "I have had posters struck off and sent men to pin them to trees along the trails, besides spreading them broadcast through Animas and the neighboring towns. I have offered to pay any reward that might be asked for information leading to the safe return of your child, with no questions asked."

Keene Bryer lifted his head, his eyes bloodshot and dimmed with unshed tears, his voice hardly articulate as he said:

"And what will be the result?"

"Good, I trust."

"It has been evil so far, then!" with a flash of fire in his eyes. "You know I have had heavy offers for the Golden Hope? Well, those offers have been withdrawn, and the party writes that they have decided not to invest more capital in mining property at present."

"And you think this comes from your daughter's being stolen? That they hope to get the mine at a much lower figure?"

"Doesn't it look like it?"

"But they know you are a rich man, outside of that mine."

"With my money so tied up that I doubt if I could raise twenty thousand dollars in a day!" was the bitter response. "And what will that amount to, beside the sum those pitiless devils will ask as ransom money? If they have not already murdered my poor little girl!"

"I can see your twenty and raise it double, pardner, without quite leaving me shoal on the bar," coolly said Major Magnet, shifting his chair until his hand could touch the arm of the despondent father. "I have already got that much so I can put hands on it at an hour's notice. And it is all at your service when ever you need it."

Keene Bryer gazed steadily into the face of this man who was proving himself a friend indeed as well as a friend in need. But he read naught save frank and earnest truth in those eyes.

"You ask good security, of course, Major Magnet?"

"Your word. That is plenty good enough for me."

"You'd rather have a mortgage or bill of sale for the Golden Hope?" persisted the mine-owner.

"If it would cause you to rest easier, not unless. Is it so hard for you to realize that a man may be a friend, without wanting to make a stake? Have you really been listening to the idle talk that has been set afloat—the devil only knows how?"

"I've heard that all this was but a scheme to get hold of the Golden Hope, and that you were engineering it all," admitted Bryer, but with a smile that told how little faith he placed in that wild rumor. "Of course that is all a malicious lie, but still—"

"You can't see why I should interest myself so deeply in the matter? Is that it, my friend?"

Keene Bryer nodded assent, curiosity getting the better of his grief for the moment.

Major Magnet bowed his head and sat in silence for a brief space, like one who is fighting a battle with himself. Whatever that might be, he was not long in gaining the victory, and then his gaze frankly met that of the mine-owner.

"The whole story is too long for me to tell or you to listen to it right now, Mr. Bryer, but I pledge you my word that you shall have the whole truth before long. For now—let me say that I once had a wife whom I loved as passionately as you now love your daughter. And what my wife was then, when I wooed and married her, your daughter is now: just as young, just as lovely, just as good and true.

"It was this remarkable likeness—for your daughter might sit for the portrait of my wife when I married her, and even my eyes could hardly tell the difference—that first drew my attention toward Miss Bryer, and though I trust I should have done my duty, as a man, had she been ugly as she is beautiful, that wonderful resemblance made me eager to save her from the snare into which I felt she was falling.

"And now, Keene Bryer, I renew my offer: fifty thousand dollars are ready and waiting for your needs, and unless you wish to insult me as honest friend was never insulted before this day, don't talk more about mortgages and bills of sale!"

There were tears in the eyes of both men as their hands met. Perhaps the nerves of each were shaken by the events of late, but that dimness of vision was a credit rather than a disgrace to their manhood.

"I lost her just when she was nearest and dearest to my heart," the major added, his tones far from steady. "How and through what I may tell you some day. She might have been saved by one true friend, but that friend been at hand. Don't let your child—as like my lost one in face and figure as star is like star—don't let her be lost for lack of a friend. And I offer to be that saving friend, pardner!"

Keene Bryer said nothing. For the moment he was powerless to do so. And before he could regain his composure, Marshal Tolley came into the office like a human tornado, his face flaming, his eyes aglow, his voice full of mad passion and disgust as he cried:

"Hell's to pay, gentlemen! Creed Ashmole's broken jail!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SPRAT TO CATCH A WHALE.

KEENE BRYER lay back in his office chair, white as a sheet, seeming completely unmanned by that fierce announcement, staring at the angry official with dazed eyes and drooping jaw.

Major Magnet also seemed startled, but he quickly rallied and faced the situation, asking: "How did it happen? When did you make the discovery, Tolley?"

"Last night—just now—devil roast Bill Hackney!"

He dropped into a chair, his hands tight clinched, his deep chest swelling until it seemed as though his garments must burst before the unusual pressure.

"Did your deputy take any steps toward following the rascal?"

"Never a one—Satan grill him for dinner! And that's what sets me boiling over!"

"Then he has good—have you any idea just when the fellow got out, Tolley?"

Major Magnet put the questions so calmly that his apparent freedom from excitement naturally had its effect on the mad marshal. He brought his tongue under better control, and spoke with more precision.

"Sometime between supper and breakfast, of course, but at what hour of the night you can guess as well as I. You know business called me down to Durango, and I only got back on the seven train. I went right to the jug, for I had work for my deputy. And there Hackney met me to say that Ashmole had broken out."

"Of his own accord, or do you reckon he had outside assistance?"

"Some one helped him, for Hackney said that he found a ladder leaning against the building, and the bars had been sawed in two."

"That let's Hackney out, then?" slowly asked the major.

"He's an ass, but he isn't a rogue," nodded Tolley, his face gloomy as though he had lost his last friend on earth. "All I blame him for is in covering the matter up and waiting for my return, instead of setting men to work on the track."

"Gone—poor Rose!" sighed Keene Bryer, his head drooping as though this last blow had completely broken him down, body and mind.

Major Magnet sprang to his side, at the same time hastily saying:

"Go do what you can, Tolley. I can't advise you; for you know better than I what steps to take. Only—look at this poor father, and for his sake do your level best!"

"I'll find the hound if he's top o' the earth!" vowed the marshal as he left the office in hot haste.

Major Magnet bent his efforts to restoring the almost insensible man, pouring a glass of liquor from a bottle which he found in a locker beneath the desk, gently forcing Keene Bryer to swallow each drop. And while doing this, he spoke slowly, distinctly:

"Brace up, pardner. I tell you that this will all turn to our good in the end. I swear it, if you like."

"Gone—to torture poor little Rose!"

"Gone, if you like, my friend, but gone to meet his doom, not to torment your daughter," persisted the major. "Did you never hear of throwing a sprat to catch a whale?"

Something in his tone more than in the words he used, recalled the scattered senses of the mine-owner, and his bloodshot eyes met those keen, almost laughing orbs which lighted up the strong, manly face.

"Only a few minutes ago you took my hand in good-fellowship, Mr. Bryer," the major gravely uttered. "I wonder if you will regret so doing when I tell you that it is owing to me that Creed Ashmole is a free man this morning?"

"To you—I can't understand."

"Let me explain, dear friend," and Major Magnet rested a soothing hand on the mine-owner's arm as he continued: "You know how vainly we tried to force, coax, or entrap Creed Ashmole into confessing his part in this sad affair. You know that neither threats nor promises of reward and immunity for his past crimes could shake him in the least."

"I know, but—"

"Yet it was plain to be seen that he was eating his heart out in confinement. I knew that he would jump at the first chance of escape, and that, knowing he was a doomed man if he lingered in or near town, he would at once make haste to join the Muck-a-mucks, who would be in duty bound to defend him against all pursuit."

"I could see no other hope so promising, so likely to gain the ends which we have in common, pardner, as to let him escape. And so I set a trusty man at work, bidding him aid Ash-

mole to break bonds, to stick to him until he could learn all about the Muck-a-mucks, and where their present den was located. Then he was to send me word, by signal, all of which we thoroughly understood, and I was to care for the rest.

"My man has done the first half of his work. When he does the rest, Rose will be set free, the evil gang wiped out, and Creed Ashmole brought to justice for the part he has taken in this vile outrage."

Keene Bryer listened to this rapid explanation like one in a waking dream. He heard the words, but seemed unable to fully catch the meaning they ought to have conveyed.

"But Rose—that devil will torment her!"

"Rose will gain a true and trusty friend in the man whom I bade set Ashmole at liberty," patiently explained the Man of Nerve. "Hank Burlap knows well the part he is to play, and I've tested him thoroughly in many ways. He'll play he works to spite me. He'll make Ashmole believe him as evil a wretch as he is himself. He'll frighten him into joining the Muck-a-mucks, if he thinks of fleeing from this section, and has his plans all laid for winning Ashmole into vouching for him as a man fit to become a member of the gang. His setting the rascal free would be voucher enough, for that matter."

As the first effects of that heavy shock began to pass away, Keene Bryer was better able to comprehend the bold game his ally was playing, and soon began to share his confidence that success would follow.

Little did either of them dream that already the trail of poor Hank Burlap had come to an end in the hills to the northwest!

"All the same, mind you, this isn't to interfere with the money arrangement in case Captain Junius sends us an envoy before Burlap can report," added Major Magnet, lighting a cigar as he drew his chair back into its former position.

"You mean that his terms are to be met, just the same?"

"Just that," with a decisive nod. "In fact, I'd rather have it that way, for with the little lady safe in your arms, I'd feel there was more room for me to spread myself. And if he has his wits busied with conducting so delicate a negotiation, Captain Junius won't have quite so much time to guard his own weak points—don't you see?"

It was rather a curious coincidence, though nothing more than what they had been expecting as possible with the passage of each hour, but just at that juncture a sharp rapping at the closed door brought the same thought to the mind of each man.

Major Magnet flashed a warning glance toward his friend, a finger touching his own lips as he called out in a clear voice:

"The door's on the latch: come in!"

The knob turned and the door swung open, to reveal a gaunt, rough-clad, rougher-looking fellow standing on the low step, his keen eyes sweeping the office with a comprehensive glance as he asked:

"Is this hyar the place whar Mister Keene Bryer hangs out?"

"You've hit it first clatter, pardner," spoke the major, nodding affably as he added: "Walk right in. How!"

"Tollable—how!" nodded the fellow, crossing the threshold.

"Fair to middling. You wished to see me?"

"I'm lookin for a gent named Keene Bryer."

"I'm your man. What's up?"

"I be—up to snuff," grinned the stranger, the tip of a forefinger drawing an eyelid significantly. "You're Major Magnet."

"And this gentleman is Mr. Keene Bryer, for whom I am acting. All his business is transacted through me. If you don't like that agency, while pitying your poor taste, all I have to say is—you know how you came in: the hole is just as big now as it was then, and you can slide through just as easily."

It was a bold course to take, but Major Magnet was a shrewd judge of human nature, and he had not made a mistake on this occasion. The stranger seemed a little puzzled, and for a brief space he hesitated how to act, but then he sulkily uttered:

"It's all right, I reckon, though I was sent to see Mr. Bryer."

"You do see him. You're from the High Muck-a-muck, of course?"

"Ef I be, you don't dast to lay a finger unto me!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MUCK-A-MUCKS' MESSENGER.

"NOT having a pair of tongs handy, why should I want to touch you, Johnny? I'm a Jew, and if you're not their pet abomination, then you've caught their grunt—by wallowing!"

"Look yer', business is business, an' I didn't come all this lonesome way fer to hev no durned rigs run onto me!" growled the man, his wiry beard fairly bristling with impotent rage. "Ef you don't want to know what I come fer, I'll kick the dust off o' my hoofs, an' take back that word to him as sent me!"

Major Magnet laughed softly as he leaned

back in his chair, gazing through half-closed lids at the fellow before him. He had gained one point in breaking down that insolent confidence.

"Business goes, Johnny—what's the other bit of your handle?"

"Sam Patch. What's that got to do with it?"

"So we can fit your tombstone according to the size of your name, of course. But go ahead, Samuel. You come from the High Muck-a-muck?"

"I ain't sayin' whar I come from, but I reckon that'll tell ye whar I'm to be let go!" growled the messenger, tossing a crumpled slip of paper on the desk.

"From Captain Junius," nodded the major, coolly reaching over and securing the paper before Keene Bryer could unfold it. "Breathes red fire and bloody murder against all who dare lay a straw in his path to delay his return—just so!"

In detail this was what was written, but perhaps it was just as well that the father did not know toward whom those threats were principally directed.

"Don't you reckon a screed like this is rather dangerous matter for a man of your make to be totin' about in this section, Samuel?" asked the major, with a cold smile. "To my certain knowing there are two-score good fellows out in the hills, any one of whom would run you up a tree with grace and dispatch at a single hint of what lies here in the hollow of my hand."

"Waal, they didn't git the chance, did they?"

"Which proves the wisdom of the ancients, and that all living are hardly to be classed with the wise men. But that don't count, and business goes. Captain Junius gave you other writin' besides this bit of your character?"

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no," grunted Patch, moving a chair so that while he occupied it, neither of these two men could get between himself and the office door, in time to cut off a hasty retreat, should he deem that wisest. "Afore we talk that way, reckon it won't be no harm fer to finish out that bit o' writin' you've jest tucked into your clothes; an' as the fu'st word—pass it back ag'in!"

"Certainly; if you want to tote a death-warrant around with you, Samuel!" blandly smiled the major, returning the safeguard.

"That's my lookout, an' I ain't huntin' up my prayers just yit, nuther," nodded the outlaw, stowing the paper away in his breast. "Fer when you come to know fer dead sure that on my gittin' back alive an' whole in hide depends the good o' the gal—your gal, Mister Keene Bryer," with a grim nod toward the mine-owner.

"She is well? She has not been harmed?" faltered the father, unable longer to quietly submit to the will of his friend.

"She was well when I left. She'll be all right when I git back—ef they ain't no tryin' to play double onto us," promptly replied the Muck-a-muck.

"Shall I withdraw and leave you to treat with Sam Patch, Mr. Bryer?" coldly asked the major, rising to his feet and reaching out a hand for his hat.

It was not that the mine-owner had done any harm as yet that made him speak thus, but through fears for what he might do with his nerves so utterly broken down.

The mere hint was sufficient, and Keene Bryer huskily cried:

"Stay—I had to ask so much. I beg you will do the talking."

"And I beg that you will address yourself to me, Samuel," with all his former coolness as he returned to his seat, his face as difficult to read as that of the sphinx. "You started to say?"

"That the boss knowed you was muxin' up in this job, an' he told me to see that they was a clean, clear-through understandin' atwixt you an' me afore I opened my head on t'other pint."

"All of which means—can you tell us, Samuel?"

"That I'm to be let go jest as I come. That ef you try to foller me out o' town, or set any o' your hired hounds onto the trail o' me, or make even the weentiest step to'rds gittin' at the boss's secrets through my fetchin' this word to you, the damage'll all fall on the back o' the young leddy. Is that plain enough fer ye, major?"

"I believe I catch your drift," with a cold nod. "This boss of yours, this Captain Junius, or the High Muck-a-muck of Animas as he calls himself, takes us to be as treacherous and as foul-dealing as himself. Is my definition correct, Mr. Patch?"

"I'd rather you said it than me, an' you'd rather say it to his back than afore the face o' him!" grimly retorted the messenger. "But let it go at that. You swear you won't foller n'r hev me foller'd?"

"We haven't the slightest intention of doing either, Samuel, as long as our lady friend would be endangered thereby. After—well, you might just hint to your boss that I'm going for his scalp. Tell him that this continent isn't near big enough for him and me both. Say that I've taken a solemn oath to run him down first, then to run him up. Put it just that way, and I

reckon the tickling in his throat will help him divine my full meaning."

"It's ketchin' fu'st, mind ye," scowled Sam Patch, apparently making the application personal.

"That's my real name—Jack Ketch," laughed the major, then resuming his business-like air: "Are you satisfied with the preliminaries, Mr. Patch? If so, pray proceed."

"Fu'st: we've got somethin' you 'gents want. The idee is this: how bad does you want it? How fur down in your clothes is you ready to go fer to git that somethin' back ag'in?"

"Name your price and I'll meet it!" cried Keene Bryer, tortured beyond all endurance by this seemingly vain waste of words.

"Provided it is within the bounds of reason," amended Major Magnet. "There's such a thing as grunting entirely too loud, mind!"

"It ain't my grunt, but what the boss says. An' his figgers is put up to the fifty thousand notch."

"I'll pay it!" cried Keene Bryer, reaching out his trembling hands as though to receive that blessed boon then and there. "Give her back—give me my child! What is gold to me while she is lost?"

An ugly glitter came into the steel-gray eyes of the major at this fresh outburst, and his lips began to bleed where those strong teeth had nipped it.

After all the promises Keene Bryer had made, to break down like this! It was annoying, yet how could he help it?

"Wish't I mought, by thunder!" cried Patch, his face growing with avarice as he tried to fully realize that vast amount of dollars.

Keene Bryer put an evil construction on his ejaculation, and sunk back in his chair, covering his face with his hands. Major Magnet smiled grimly, for once lacking sympathy with the tortured father.

If he remained thus until the negotiations were completed, so much the better for both parent and child.

"You set your mark high enough to stand a tidy tumble, my fine fellow, but luckily for your treasury we're not men to go back on word that has once passed our lips. We'll meet your master's figures, and trust to luck to get even with him in the end. Now—when and where will the lady be delivered to us?"

"That ain't fer me to say."

"What do you mean by that?"

Sam Patch chuckled coarsely. Though that strong face was like an iron mask, so far as betraying the real emotions which worked back of it, he was keen enough to know that even Major Magnet was suffering from suspense.

A little before he had been one to feel the pricks of a keen tongue; now he could turn the tables.

"That beggars mustn't think to be choosers, major, an' that you've got to hold your patience until the boss gits a good ready fer to let ye come up to the trough."

"A swinish metaphor, and why not?" laughed Major Magnet, his lips curling with scorn. "When the final round-up comes, Sam Patch, I'll have a barrel fresh heated for your especial benefit."

"You'll find every bristle a porcupine-quill when you come to pluck me!" grinned the outlaw, carrying the metaphor still further.

"And mighty measly pork underneath, to finish up with. But not to completely lose control of my stomach, we'll bark back and take a fresh start. How much authority did the High Muck-a-muck place in your hands when he selected you as his envoy?"

"He said I was to come here an' find Keene Bryer. I was to make him onderstan' that ef he tried to play any tricks, the wu'st wou'd fall back on the gal's head. Then I was to tell him the figgers he reckoned she was wu'th to her pap—fifty thousand cases!"

"You have said all this before. Go on, Samuel."

"That was all, 'cept to say that you was to write a note sayin' I'd done my duty, an' ef you was ready to meet his figgers."

"Which statement I'll proceed to draw up at once," nodded Major Magnet as he turned to one end of the desk and suiting the action to his words. "While I'm slinging ink, you can furnish what you need to say, Samuel."

"I don't reckon they's any need fer wastin' more wind. I've said all the boss told me to."

Major Magnet quickly wrote the desired message, handing the sheet to the Muck-a-muck messenger for his approval.

If Sam Patch could not read, he at least made a very fair pretense of so doing, banding back the paper with a short nod of approval.

"Ef it don't bit the boss jest right, I won't be the one to ray fer the mistake, mind ye, major!"

Major Magnet placed the paper in an envelope, sealed and returned it to the messenger, saying dryly:

"You know who it is intended for, and in case of accidents by the way, it may be as well not to put the High Muck-a-muck's name on the outside. I've set you down for scalding, not the rope."

Sam Patch placed the envelope in snug hiding, but there was a look of uneasiness in

his eyes. This coolness was far from reassuring. He wondered what cunning trap the major had set for him.

"Your business is at an end, Samuel?" blandly inquired the major, rising to his feet and putting on his hat.

"I reckon, ef—"

"Then permit me to show you the way to the door. This office is beginning to need ventilation most abominably!"

Crossing the floor he opened the door, standing aside for the man from the mountains to pass by, acting as though there was contagion in his slightest touch. And yet he followed the outlaw over the threshold and into the street.

"Don't forget to remember that it'll be mighty risky to even try to follow me, major!" scowled the ruffian, suspiciously.

"You play your own cards fairly, and never bother your head about us, my fine fellow!" said the major, tapping him on the shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNSPOKEN VOW.

SAM PATCH shook the hand from his arm and turned away with a muttered oath.

Major Magnet stepped briskly back and entered the office, closing the door behind him and springing swiftly to where he could peer out through the window looking out upon the street, seeing without danger of being seen in return.

"Bryer, come here—quick!" he called in sharp but guarded notes.

"What is it, friend?" huskily asked the mine-owner, yet hastening to obey that summons.

"Not too close; the suspicious rascal is looking over his shoulder even now!" muttered the Man of Nerve, checking the mine-owner before he crossed the danger line. "You see him?"

"I see the man who was in here, yes," replied the bewildered father, catching sight of that gaunt figure rapidly passing away.

"And you see that other—the half-breed?"

"I see some one, certainly, but—but what do you mean?"

Major Magnet drew a long breath and brushed a hand across his forehead, then flashed a keen, doubting glance into the face of his partner in this intricate and perilous affair.

"Nothing much. I only thought that there might be some connection between the two; that Sam Patch brought another of his gang along to take up his work in case we tried to pinch him. Would you know the half-breed again if you were to see him?"

"I only caught a glimpse of him before he turned the corner, so I fear not. Is it essential that I should?"

"Well, I guess not," admitted the major as he turned from the window and resumed his former seat.

He would have given a far different answer if Keene Bryer had been at all like his old self; cool, keen, clear-witted. Instead, he was like a man on the point of breaking down, and his recent forgetfulness of the earnest pledges he had given Major Magnet as to his actions in case the High Muck-a-muck should send an envoy, still more plainly indicated his unreliability while the fate of his idolized child hung trembling in the balance.

If Keene Bryer had been at his best, Major Magnet would have confessed that he had followed Sam Patch outside for a particular purpose. That when he placed a hand on his shoulder in parting, he had given a signal which was promptly recognized and answered by the ragged, dirty, disreputable looking half-breed lounging on the sunny side of the street.

And when Major Magnet entered the office, to leap to the window, it was to catch the signal which the half-breed made before turning the corner on the track of the Muck-a-muck.

All this he meant to tell his partner in that case, but instinct warned him to pause in time.

Such a dangerous secret had better be locked within his own bosom. Weak, unwarmed, fearful for his child, Keene Bryer would see only peril to her in that bold move. Had not Sam Patch repeatedly warned them that she should suffer the penalty if any attempt was made to dog him back to the outlaw who sent him there?

Swiftly reasoning thus, Major Magnet buried that portion of the day's work, simply saying:

"Well, pardner, what do you think of it? Captain Junius is not a whit more modest in his demands than we gave him credit for!"

"I will pay—thanks to you, dear friend!" leaning forward and gripping that strong hand between his unsteady ones. "I will pay his price—so gladly! If it could only be this day—this hour!"

"We must cultivate patience, pardner," with a soothing power in his voice that came very gratefully just then. "You know now that the little lady is alive and well. You can feel sure that she will be treated as kindly as may be, while she represents such a big pile of shekels. Captain Junius will not risk damaging his goods, be sure!"

"You think so? You are not saying this merely to quiet my fears? He will keep his part of the bargain? I will have my pet back again before long?" brokenly panted the stricken father.

"You shall, you will, as Heaven bears me!"

earnestly said the Man of Nerve, his face lit up by the bright glow which filled his eyes. "I believe in that as firmly as I do in the existence of a God."

Keene Bryer drew back, covering his face with his hands, tears beginning to trickle through his trembling fingers. But they were tears of dawning hope, not of deepening despair.

Major Magnet permitted them to fall for a time. He knew that they would help bring relief to that throbbing brain. But time was passing, and he had other work in view which must be attended to.

Yet he could not leave his friend like this, without at least an effort to bring back a portion of the nerve and cool powers which had enabled Keene Bryer to work his way up from the ranks.

"There's a time for weeping and a time for work, pardner," he said, as he firmly gripped the mine-owner by an arm. "I know something of all you are feeling. In the years gone by I passed through a still hotter furnace, for with me there was not a ray of hope; with you, the clouds are breaking away, even as I speak."

"That's sentiment," with a short, peculiar laugh. "This is business, pardner!"

"Tell me what to do, and I'll try my level best, major," said the father, dropping his hands and making an effort to choke back his emotions.

"If it's for her—for my little Rose—I'll prove capable of carrying it out, despite this miserable weakness."

"That's hearty, and I begin to know you again. I have to leave you for a bit, and it's barely possible that Captain Junius may send his final offer when I am away. Of course there can be no delay, then, so to make all sure, I've placed the money in the bank, subject to your order. Draw on it without a scruple, for I mean to have the whole sum back again—and his evil scalp with it!"

"You will not endanger her? Remember his warning!"

"I've written every word down in my brain. I am considering her good above all else."

"You are proving that by your deeds. Few men would give so much money merely to save a father's treasure."

"You are my friend. She is a woman. And—if all goes well I may tell you still another reason which leads me to act as I am acting in this affair, pardner."

Before Keene Bryer could fairly note that bright, soft gleam in his eyes, or make reply, a hasty footstep came to the door and a strong hand swung the barrier open without pausing to rap.

"What now, Tolley?" sharply cried Major Magnet, as the city marshal strode into the room. "Found Creed Ashmole?"

"I haven't found anything, but others have. You know a man called Hank Burlap?"

Major Magnet turned white as a sheet for an instant at the mention of that name, but Richard Tolley was far too deeply excited to take note of that alteration.

"I've heard of him—yes. What has happened?"

"He's been murdered. Some of the boys found him in the hills, while looking for Creed Ashmole. Found him dead—shot from behind, with a hole through his skull."

Keene Bryer gave a gasping cry, and one glance into his horrified face decided the major. Grasping Tolley by the arm he hurried him back to the door, saying:

"Where was he found? Tell me so that I can find the place."

"I'll show you, major," with a more natural tone as he left the office. "I was just going out. Wonder if you had the same idea that came to me when the boys said there were two men's tracks at the spot; that one rode away; that Hank Burlap remained behind; and near where his body lay in a pool of his own blood, there was a horse, stolen from town last night!"

"It looks black—black as hell itself!"

That was all Major Magnet said just then. And he was even more reticent when, later in the day, he leaped from the saddle to bend over the ghastly corpse of the man whom he had so unwittingly sent to meet an untimely death.

But if his lips were motionless, his tongue silent, deep down in his heart an unspoken vow was being registered.

If God spared his life, this foul murder should be terribly avenged. From that hour henceforward, Creed Ashmole should live under the shadow of the scaffold—should die on the scaffold by the rope!

CHAPTER XXIX.

NO CRIME SO BLACK AS FAILURE.

CREED ASHMOLE drew himself erect in the saddle and swiftly, impatiently repeated the signal which was to prove him a friend and a member of the Muck-a-mucks.

But his face began to pale and that hunted look to come back into his eyes as no immediate answer came. Could it be that even these acknowledged criminals refused to accept him as one of them?

Not a word had been spoken as yet. He had come to the point where he had been warned

that a guard was constantly posted, and to pass which before a perfect understanding was reached would call forth fire and lead without stint. And though even his keen eyes were baffled as they strove to detect the hiding-place of the guard, his waiting ears caught the sound which he knew must be that challenge; one to pass unheeded by the alien, since it seemed but the shrill chipper of the pine squirrel, cut short by the angry spit of a mountain-cat.

Promptly enough he had given the correct answer, imparted to him by the High Muck-a-muck in person, but instead of the welcome greeting for which he longed so ardently—how ardently only one fleeing from the rope, only one who has a haunting specter constantly at his elbow could realize—there was only grim silence.

"You know me? I am one of the family! I'm Creed Ashmole, and I bring most important news to the chief!" sharply cried the murderer, yet not daring to press forward a single pace, lest that attempt bring death upon him.

"I know that you're too mighty close to the dead-line for a nervous man," came a harsh voice from somewhere among the rocks and the bushes. "I ain't cross-eyed. I can't go one eye onto the line and keep you kivered with t'other. Better r'ar back a weenty bit, fer I'm a man as al'ays keeps on the safe side of the fence!"

Creed Ashmole promptly reined his horse back a few paces, something like relief showing itself in his pale face, mingling with an angry sneer as he cried out:

"So! you have found your tongue, at last? I began to think I'd have to report you as sleeping on your post. I can pass?"

"Ef the boss says so."

"What do you mean? Didn't I give the sign straight?"

"I mean clean business, an' ef you come a foot nigher ontel you're whitewashed, down goes your meat-house fer good an' all!" sternly warned the hidden sentinel.

Creed Ashmole recoiled, adding two steps back to the one he had advanced, flinging up an empty hand, palm to the front.

"Send for the High Muck-a-muck—"

"I've done it a'ready. As fer the sign, you give the old one right enough, or you'd be on your way to glory long ago. But you didn't give the new tail, an' that's why you're here at quarantine, waitin' fer the boss to come an' look at your bill o' health. Fer your sake, stranger, I'm hopin' it will be clean enough to let you pass."

There was silence for a brief space after this grim speech, then Creed Ashmole uttered a short, glad cry of relief as he caught sight of a tall figure approaching. Despite the mask which he wore, it was easy for him to recognize the High Muck-a-muck of Animas.

"A mighty cold reception for a warm friend and ally, Captain Junius!" Ashmole cried out, a touch of anger tinging his relief. "Please mark my jacket so that your guard will know me when he sees me again!"

"Ah! you, is it, old fellow?" uttered the chief, stopping short, and seemingly anything but overcome with joy at the recognition. "How'd you happen to get out of quod?"

"Through no thanks to you, if you've forgotten that little fact!" flashed Ashmole, riding forward until he was by the side of the chief.

"Do you observe all vows of the Order quite as perfectly, captain?"

"It's all right, my good man," quietly cried the outlaw leader, with a wave of his hand toward the rock where the guard had his covert.

"And you, Ashmole, want to wait next time for a permit to pass. If my fellow yonder hadn't been a bit slow on trigger, I'd be weeping bitter tears of hot salt over your untimely end right now!"

This was not the sort of reception for which Creed Ashmole had hoped, nor even that which he expected as a right, but there was something in the voice and manner of his ally that kept him from venting his resentment further just then. And as Captain Junius turned to retrace his steps, he rode silently along behind him until well inside the outlaw retreat.

His eyes—somewhat sunken and looking larger since his face had lost a little of its flesh—roved keenly, eagerly around, pausing at each little hut and dwelling for an instant on each human figure to be seen, but without making the discovery he sought.

"You haven't given her up yet?" he asked, eager to learn the truth.

"Time enough to answer your questions when you've replied to a few of mine," curtly said the outlaw chief. "Turn your horse loose. He can't stray far, and some of the men will look after him."

"He needs care. I've ridden him hard."

"With how many men of Animas crowding your heels?" demanded Captain Junius, turning at the door of a hut built apart from all the rest and sacred to his own use.

"Not one," frowned Ashmole, beginning to revolt from that harsh, unfriendly manner. "But if there had been a thousand, I should have come, all the same! Of what benefit your mighty oaths, else?"

For a brief space their eyes met, then Captain

Junius flung aside his disguise of *papier mache*, leaving only a mask of thin silk over his face, without which not one of his band had ever seen him to their knowledge. With this came a change in his voice and manner as well.

"Come, Ashmole, you can't afford to quarrel with your chief, nor I with my able lieutenant. I felt too grumpy to be polite, and then—I was wondering how you got out of limbo! It's no secret, of course?"

"It wouldn't be if you had lived up to the oath you swore one and all of the band had mutually taken," sulkily retorted the fugitive. "I might have rotted in that hole for all of you!"

"Hardly, when hemp is so cheap," laughed the chief. "Oaths are all right in their places, but business comes before pleasure, and I've had my hands full to overflowing ever since before your slip-up."

"Looking out for your pocket and letting my throat run its own chances, of course!"

"Human nature I should," nodded the High Muck-a-muck. "But were you really in such peril? I can't think it."

"Then you know mighty little about Major Magnet—curses cover him from crown to sole!"

"Amen! I'm not loving him for a cent. But that don't explain how you got out of limbo, Ashmole. Hope you didn't squeal, as the price?"

"I might, if I had anticipated such a reception as this!" sullenly growled the murderer.

"Maybe you did!"

Lightly as those three words were spoken, there was something underlying them that warned Ashmole to curb his tongue and subdue his resentment sufficiently to clear his record unless he wanted worse to follow.

"I didn't, then, though you could hardly blame me if I had. I was set free by a fellow who had a hot grudge against Major Magnet."

"A plant, by the holies!" flashed Captain Junius, leaping to his feet with revolver drawn. "A trap set by that cunning devil! And you fell into it? You took his help and—where is he now?"

"Far enough away from this spot!" huskily uttered the assassin, cowering, but more from the vision of that cruelly murdered man in the hills than from the hot anger of this outlaw.

"How do you know? How can you say that he hasn't dogged every step of yours from the moment you parted company? If I knew for a fact, what I can only suspect, I'd scatter your brains to the four winds!"

Creed Ashmole was thoroughly alarmed, now, and by the living rather than the dead. He had vowed to keep his bloody secret safe locked within his own bosom, but it escaped him almost before he realized the fact.

"Can a dead man follow a trail such as mine?" he blurted out, cowering before that menacing weapon.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Put up your gun and I'll tell you all about it," with forced calmness, now that the plunge had been taken, really feeling relieved at the thought of having a confidant. "I thought much the same as you, and holding the safety of the gang higher than any one life, I left Hank Burlap on the trail behind me—with one more hole in his skull than nature provided him with at birth!"

"Give me the whole story, please," coldly demanded the High Muck-a-muck, resuming the seat he had left in his excitement. "No lies, no crooked steps, but plain gospel if you are not a fool."

With those redly glowing eyes upon him, Creed Ashmole dared not refuse nor resent that harsh suspicion. And with the air of a man who feels he deserves high praise rather than censure, he told his story, truthfully enough in all save that he threw suspicion too strong on poor Hank Burlap.

"What else could I do?" he almost savagely demanded, after telling how he killed his rescuer with his own pistol.

"What else? You miserable idiot!" flashed Captain Junius, springing to his feet with his eyes fairly scorching the pale face upon which they rested as he added: "Why didn't you make all the more of him? Why didn't you pretend that you took him for just what he offered himself? Why not bring him here, and then turn upon and denounce him?"

"Then you might have called me a traitor, trying to sell you out!" faltered Ashmole, trembling in every limb.

"And now I call you a thousand-fold worse! A traitor can be shot and his mischief ends with him, but a fool—and that fool a murderer! Do you know what you have done, Creed Ashmole?"

"My duty as I viewed it."

"Wasn't it enough that your infernal folly had already tied my hands almost too tight for action at all? Wasn't it enough that you gave Major Magnet a clew to the fitting of Rose Bryer, through your asinine cunning—through your silly resolve to still keep your hold on respectability and honor and—bah!" with a fierce sweep of his clinched hand. "It almost drives me mad to think of it!"

Creed Ashmole had retreated as far as the walls of the hut would allow, and in desperation

he drew a weapon—the same with which he had done poor Hank Burlap to death.

Captain Junius saw this, but he only forced a laugh of bitterest scorn as he faced the cornered villain.

"You have blundered, Creed Ashmole, and that is a worse crime than open treachery in my eyes. I ought to shoot you, but I can't do that while I hold you so much less value than a cartridge."

"You fled here for shelter, for safety from those who are dead sure to hunt you for vengeance. I'll not deny you that much. You can have shelter and food and such security as your infernal folly may have left us."

"Now get out of my sight! And if you try to steal out of our lines without first receiving my permission, I'll have you strung up like a mangy cur!"

Captain Junius flung wide the rude door, standing aside as though he felt there might be contagion in the slightest touch, motioning the murderer to leave him. And trembling like one with the ague, Creed Ashmole obeyed, beginning to pay the penalty he had so richly earned.

CHAPTER XXX.

A VILLAIN'S LAST STAKE.

THOSE were indeed gloomy times for the sinner!

Everybody seemed to avoid him, yet he never felt free from watchful eyes. The very lowest and most degraded of the band seemed to hold themselves his superior, and hour by hour Creed Ashmole grew to know that the paths of sin are full of thorns and nettles.

Through it all ran a strong sense of injustice, which by no means sweetened the cup from which he was forced to drink.

"Can't I see it, you cunning demon!" he grated, viciously, as he caught a passing glimpse of Captain Junius on the day following his arrival at the outlaws' retreat. "You think to freeze me out, now that I can't serve your ends any further. You think to cheat me out of my share of the ransom-money. But will you? Not if I can help it!"

He was plotting and planning how to foil the partner who had not only left him to suffer imprisonment without aid, but who was even now bent on cheating him of all reward.

"And but for me he could never have won even this far!"

That was one of his most bitter thoughts, and every time it recurred, Creed Ashmole inwardly vowed to thwart the traitor, even though in the attempt he might risk his own neck.

During those gloomy hours of ostracism, he had more than once caught sight of Rose Bryer, but each time she was accompanied by Little Firefly, and he had avoided rather than courted her attention.

That did not keep him from planning and plotting, however, with the maiden whom he had so bitterly wronged as the center about which his hopes of gain and revenge revolved, and he eagerly watched for a chance to come when he might take the first step in that direction.

While making no effort to seek another interview with Captain Junius, he saw and heard enough to convince him that the preliminary steps toward ransoming Rose Bryer had been taken, and this told him he could not afford to waste much time.

"If his offer is accepted—and it must be enormous if Keene Bryer does not jump at it!—and terms arranged before I can get to have a talk with her, then my cake is all dough!"

More than one hot curse was hurled after Little Firefly, who had constituted herself body-guard to the fair captive, and of whom she had grown passionately fond; so much so that in her sympathy Little Firefly made no scruple about betraying her father, so far as to assure Rose that instead of attempting to capture the father, Captain Junius was making efforts to ransom the child.

Time and again did Little Firefly unconsciously foil the schemer in his hopes, by joining Rose in her little strolls through the hill-locked valley, but she could not always be on guard, and the moment for which Creed Ashmole so viciously longed was drawing near.

Meanwhile Creed Ashmole carefully pondered his scheme, trying as best he might to strengthen its weak points, though even his cunning found this anything but an easy task.

"If I only felt sure of how much she already knows!" he scowled, gnawing his finger-tips as he watched the two maidens through the foliage of the bushes beneath which he was lying. "If I could tell what that little demon has revealed to her!"

He knew that it would be worse than vain to attempt to make Rose believe he was a prisoner, like herself. Little Firefly would surely have spoken of his coming, and Rose would not be a woman if she failed to glean through questions all that her companion could tell her.

"You cat!" Ashmole frowned as he caught a fair sight of Little Firefly's face, wondrously like that of her present companion, despite the delicate coating of tan which the sun's ardent kisses had spread over her cheeks. "Time was

when I felt that I could love you—time is when I'd ask nothing better than to twist your dainty neck! And it may come to that, too, unless you give me the chance I thirst for!"

For once fortune seemed weary of frowning, for even as that vicious sentence crossed his lips, a clear whistle rung through the air, and Little Firefly sprang to her feet with a laughing frown.

"'Tis daddy calling, little sister, and from the manner in which he expends his breath, I've no wish to ruffle his temper more than it is already. Wait for me, Rose; I'll not be gone long!"

That shrill signal sounded again, and pursing up her rosy lips Little Firefly sent ahead a musical imitation, casting a laughing look back at her friend as she sped swiftly away in the direction of the hut occupied by Captain Junius.

Creed Ashmole could hardly realize his good fortune, even when he saw that Rose remained sitting on the grassy knoll, with no other in sight. It seemed too good to be true, and rising to his feet on the further side of his leafy covert, he gazed keenly, suspiciously around in every direction, searching for a spy among the many who had taken turns in dogging his footsteps ever since Captain Junius flung off the mask of partnership.

But if any there were on such duty, his hasty search failed to uncover them, and not knowing when such another opportunity might be offered him, Creed Ashmole silently left his covert and cautiously approached the spot where Rose Bryer was seated, her head bowed, her hands locked as they lay in her lap, tears dimming her bright eyes as she mused over the strange freaks of fortune and wondered how it would all end—how long before she would be restored to the loving arms of her dear parent.

Creed Ashmole paused when but a pace or two divided him from the musing maiden, his sunken eyes roving keenly around, but with the same result as at first. There were none of the Muck-a-mucks to be seen, and so far as he could tell, none to interfere with him and his victim.

"Rose—Miss Bryer!" he softly uttered, throwing sorrow and passionate hope into his voice. "For my life do not cry out!"

The caution was timely, for the maiden sprang to her feet at the sound of her name, to shrink back with a look of fear and aversion as she recognized the being before her. And only for the trembling of his voice, as he uttered that adjuration, she would have called aloud for help.

"As high Heaven hears me, Rose Bryer, you wrong me in your mind," huskily added Ashmole, stretching out his hands appealingly, but wisely making no forward motion besides. "Is it just to condemn me unheard?"

"I must go. I cannot listen to you, Mr. Ashmole!"

"Stop. Listen to me, as you hope for mercy in your own hour of need, Miss Bryer!" his tones full of despair, yet with a note of command which unconsciously arrested the maiden. "I know what those demons have told you about me. I know that they claim I am one of them, to the full as black or blacker, but they lie! Unwittingly, it may be, but still they lie. May I speak still further, Rose? May I explain why I am here, seemingly one of this vile gang of law-breakers?"

"Seemingly you are one of them, and there is red blood on your hands!" impulsively cried the maiden, shrinking back with horror imprinted upon her features.

"Have they lied so foully?" brokenly asked the cunning villain, his head drooping forward, his arms sinking to his side, his whole demeanor that of one bent and almost broken beneath a shameful burden which is not his by right. "And you believed them? You—for love of whom I have exposed myself to all this shame?"

This was not a part which Creed Ashmole had rehearsed so often while waiting and watching for a chance to "get even" with Captain Junius, for he could not foresee just such an introduction. But his action was all the more impressive because it showed no signs of calm study.

Again that old, puzzling doubt returned to the troubled brain of the maiden, and she knew not whether to believe this man innocent or guilty.

Ashmole was cool enough to see his chance, and he made the most of it without delay.

"As you hope for mercy when you come to stand before the judgment-seat, Rose Bryer, hear me out before you set me down as a criminal too vile for a look, too evil for a word of pity! Will you condemn me all unheard? Is that a part of your charity? Then go your way and I will go mine—to death! For, while you refuse to hear my plea, what else is left to me?"

"I did not. Stay!" impulsively cried the bewildered girl, checking him as he seemed about to turn away, his head bowed, his whole being expressive of dumb despair. "If you are not what they say, why are you here, free and without bonds or guard?"

"Because of my mad love for you, Rose! Because I saw no other way of rescuing you, unharmed, but by perjuring myself!" he cried, huskily.

CHAPTER XXXI.

KISSING LEAD, NOT LIPS.

A FAINT flush came into the maiden's face as she listened, and she visibly shrunk from the terms he used.

Creed Ashmole saw as much, but he was too desperate to take warning, as he might have done with more time before him.

"Yet you doubt me—you shrink from me, after all I have dared and suffered for your sake, Rose?" his voice low and husky, his haggard face lined with pain, love and reproach mingling in his eyes.

"Because you have no right to address me as you have, as you are now doing, Mr. Ashmole. Even if I could believe—Why are you here, one of this outlawed band?"

"In hopes of saving you, Miss Bryer, from a doom that ought to seem far worse than death itself."

"I am not so friendless but that—"

"Those whom you are tempted to trust are your worst enemies, Rose Bryer!" springing forward and speaking like one who has resolved to risk all on a single cast. "They are lying all the while they hold out hopes of a speedy freedom! They have not the slightest intention of letting you go, even after they have stripped your father and your friends to their last dollar! All a lie—all a lie, I swear to you!"

Rose shrunk away, trembling like a leaf. Despite her more than doubts of this man, she was powerfully impressed by his almost fierce earnestness. Surely he could not be playing a part, now!

"In your heart you begin to suspect what I can prove to you, if you only grant me time. In your heart you know that neither Captain Junius nor his will-o'-the-wisp daughter really means you well. Yet you have listened to their smooth lying until you are ready to turn your back on the truest, best, most earnest friend fortune has left you, outside of your father."

"Meaning yourself, Mr. Ashmole?" with a faint arching of her brows.

In his haste Ashmole knew that he had made a mistake, but he dared not lose precious time in striving to cover it over. What he had laid claim to he must prove, or all was lost.

"Is this a time for mock modesty, girl?" his eyes aglow, his words flowing swift and forcible. "You refuse to take my word, yet sneer at my backing it up with proof. So be it; even if you continue thus to the very end!"

"I have sworn to save you from the bitter fate which has been placed against your name by Captain Junius. I risked my life to save you when he wrecked the train, only—"

"By rushing to fling me into the arms of his men?"

"You believe even that?" his face showing how hard the thrust struck him. "But let it go for now. When time is more full I'll answer your bitter taunt, and you'll beg my pardon for so shamefully insulting the man who has become an outlaw for your sole sake!"

"You admit it? You confess that you are a member of the band against which you pretend to warn me?"

"I am a member just this far: I joined Captain Junius for the one and only purpose of saving you, Rose Bryer! He pretends that you will be restored to your father the hour that a sum of money is paid him in exchange. Instead of that, he meant to secure the gold—a fortune in itself!—and still keep you fast in his clutches! And for what? To make you his wife—willingly if he can win you over, by force if you withstand his pleadings and his threats."

Creed Ashmole never acted a part more perfectly than he acted this, because he felt that he was risking his all on a last stake. To lose meant more than ordinary defeat: it meant death at the hands of Captain Junius and his Muck-a-mucks.

He saw that his earnestness was impressing the maiden, but he dared not pause to let his words sink deeper. At any moment interruption might come, and he hurriedly added:

"You must have seen that I am under a cloud, Miss Bryer. It comes because I dared threaten the monster when he told me how he meant to cheat your father out of both gold and daughter. He threatened me with the bitterest tortures human ingenuity could devise if I so much as hinted at aught of this where the doubt could reach your ears. In seeking this interview with you I am sealing my own doom, unless you take pity on me—on yourself and your father as well!"

"What do you mean?" faltered Rose.

"That I can and will save you from this devilish snare, if you will but trust me—if you will but give me one hope to feed upon! Rose—my darling—"

With a low cry she struck aside the hands which offered to touch her, springing back and then facing him with all trace of doubt and irresolution banished from her beautiful face—never more lovely than in those moments of indignant scorn and accusation.

"No more, you traitor to all that is pure and good!" she cried, her voice ringing out clear and distinct, causing him to cower for a single breath as he flashed an apprehensive glance

over his shoulder. "You must have been born a liar, for to me you have been always false."

"I swear by all that—"

"Stop, Creed Ashmole!" lifting a warning hand. "Let me speak. Let me tell you what I have known ever since that night when the robbers wrecked the train we were on."

"You were leagued with them, even then. You left the train with me in your arms, to all the more surely throw me into their power. I know this, for while I was hiding from my enemies, you came and stood before my hiding-place, cursing your tools for permitting me to slip through their fingers! I heard you, and I recognized your voice!"

"Are you mad, girl?"

"I would be worse than mad to trust you before I trusted Little Firefly or her father. Wick- ed though he may be, he is a saint in comparison with such as you—liar, thief, forger, murderer!"

Creed Ashmole cast one swift glance around the spot, then leaped forward and caught Rose Bryer in his arms, one harsh hand choking back the cry that rose in her throat.

"You little fool!" he hissed, viciously, dropping all pretense now that he found a mask of no avail. "I would have saved you, but now—you know too much! I did love you—I love you still—but I love my own life far better! A word from your lips would seal my doom, but that word shall never be spoken. I'll kill you—I'll put a double seal on those lips; a kiss, then—"

Even as he bent forward to pollute her lips, a sharp report rung out and he reeled back with a shrill scream, for it seemed as though a bar of white-hot iron had been drawn across his own lips.

"Lead is too sweet pay for such rude love-making, Mr. Ashmole!" laughed Little Firefly, springing forward and supporting Rose on one arm while her right hand covered the baffled villain with a still smoking revolver. "Hands up and empty, you cur!" her voice turning sharp and menacing. "Stir a step forward or back, and I'll send my second shot through your evil brain!"

But Ashmole had no thoughts of seeking revenge or taking to flight, just then. The bullet had torn his lips deeply, forever disfiguring his beauty, and causing him blinding pain.

That shot alarmed the camp, and foremost among the masks came Captain Junius, weapons drawn and ready for use.

Rose Bryer saw this, and with a desperate effort she rallied her powers sufficiently to interpose her own fair form between the chief and his renegade follower, crying out imploringly:

"Do not—for my sake, spare him!"

"What has he done? Who shot? Firefly?"

"He seemed perishing for a kiss, and I gave him one," laughed the girl, her eyes still flashing with indignation.

"He has been punished—do not harm him further, please," quavered Rose, her head beginning to droop as her sight grew dim.

Captain Junius dropped his pistol and leaped forward, just in time to catch her in his arms and save her from a fall. In stern tones he bade his men, now gathered in force, to hold Ashmole under guard until his return, when he would decide upon his punishment, then bore Rose back to the hut assigned her for her own use.

Moaning, spitting out the blood that flowed into his mouth, Creed Ashmole leaned against a sapling, offering no plea, making no attempt to escape, simple pain driving all thoughts from his brain.

Still flushed with indignation, Little Firefly stood near, pistol in hand, his self-appointed guard.

The Muck-a-mucks formed a circle around the twain, wondering and waiting, too deeply interested even to interchange whispers with each other.

A few moments later the High Muck-a-muck came back, his eyes glowing redly through the twin apertures in his silken mask, but without any other sign of rage or hot passions.

"You say you barked the fellow, Firefly?" he asked coldly.

"I did, and I never made a prouder shot in all my life!" promptly responded the little Amazon.

"Never a truer one, if it was your object to spoil his beauty!" with a low, metallic laugh. "Yet even so willful a freak as you must have had a more valid excuse than that. What was it?"

"You know you summoned me, a bit ago. I was with Miss Bryer, and I left her here alone. I promised to come back, and when you dismissed me, I kept my promise."

"Those bushes cut off my view, but I caught the sound of voices. One of them—his!" with a frowning glance toward the wounded wretch. "One of them was angry, threatening, and that made me look before speaking. I saw him with Rose in his arms, vainly struggling to free herself. I heard him swear he would kill her, but that he would first win a kiss. I gave him one—fresh from my gun!"

As one man the Muck-a-mucks gave a cheer for the glorious little Amazon at this, a grim

jest which they were so fully able to appreciate.

Creed Ashmole shivered, lifting his head and glancing about him with bloodshot eyes. A hideous spectacle, just then, with his lacerated lips, his shattered teeth, his bloody front!

For the first time he seemed to fully realize his peril, and with a frantic bowl of mingled rage and fear, he snatched a pistol from his belt and tried to shoot the outlaw chief.

The lead sped wild, for a Muck-a-muck caught him about the body and twisted him to the ground, falling beside him and flashing forth a murderous knife, uplifting the weapon as he looked up for a sign or a word from his chief.

For a single breath that life hung by a hair, but the scale was turned by Little Firefly, who cried out appealingly:

"Don't—Rose begged for his worthless life, daddy!"

"Don't stain your steel, my good man," blandly uttered the chief, his very mildness causing Creed Ashmole to shiver with dread.

"Tie his hands and feet, then bring him after me. And you, Flo, go to Miss Bryer and tell her that I've granted her prayer: I shall not kill the vile wretch who so shamefully assaulted her. I'll simply turn him over to the law he has broken!"

Captain Junius waited until the wretch was bound, then led the way to a dark den in the rocks, where a sign sent his men away, leaving him alone with his prisoner.

"You heard me, I know, Creed Ashmole, but to leave you no doubts to haunt your dreams, I'll repeat: I mean to pass you over to Major Magnet to answer for the foul murder of Hank Burlap!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

SERVING TWO MASTEES.

A CAMP-FIRE was burning brightly in a secluded spot deep among the mountains of the Silver Range.

All around was gloom, for the night had set in, but where the glow of blazing logs reached, all seemed gay enough, even though voices were subdued in tone.

More than a score of stout fellows squatted in little groups, each one munching food or sipping hot coffee, supplied by a silent-footed half-breed at the slightest sign or call.

Major Magnet sat a little apart in company with Richard Tolley, the City Marshal of Animas, engaged in low conversation as they ate their supper.

"I never fancied the Injun," Tolley was saying, "but I'll call him a man and brother if he fetches this raid off O. K."

"Works count for more than faith, in a bit of business like this," nodded the major, glancing toward that silent figure, approval in his keen eyes. "I know he isn't much to look at. I know that, as a general thing, I'd prefer having him keep to leeward. But—he's gifted with the 'git thar'!"

"And that's what counts in the long run," nodded Tolley. "It was a neat bit of work, and I'm perfectly willing to give him all the credit for what he's done. The boys don't look as though the prospect had taken away their appetites, eh?"

"Why should they?" with a grim laugh. "This night'll send their names ringing through the land, to say nothing of big wages for heap fun! Not one among them but would kick over his supper for a chance to have a fight—odds not counted until the dance is over."

The half-breed came to replenish their cups, and they dropped their conversation for the time being. Even a half-breed may have scruples about being discussed before his very face.

Tinker—a name fastened to the half-breed by the contemptuous remark of a drunken miner who once declared the fellow wasn't worth a "tinker's dam"—had been almost the only hope left Major Magnet after his finding how Hank Burlap had failed in his mission.

Not that he doubted the eventual freeing of Rose Bryer, for Captain Junius surely would not miss clutching such a fortune as was offered for her return. But he had sworn to hunt the Muck-a-mucks down, and he feared that if the gang did not dissolve on making this rich stroke, the head of them would vanish for a time, if not for all time.

He could do nothing but wait in patience. He was too well known himself to make a move without having it noted, for by this time he felt that the outlaws had firm allies in town who would at once give warning if he made a positive move.

But then Tinker came back and curtly reported perfect success. He had dogged Sam Patch to the retreat, and had even partially explored the camp itself, under cover of darkness. He had counted the gang, and made mental notes of the weakest points in the defenses of the retreat. He could guide a force of men to the spot, and by taking advantage of the darkness of night, they might even secure a foothold inside the den before their coming was suspected.

Yes, he had seen the girl captive. She was watched, but otherwise given full freedom, so far as moving about the little valley was concerned.

In anticipation of this report, Major Magnet

had entered into an alliance with the marshal, who kept a force of men scattered through the surrounding country, ostensibly engaged in searching for Creed Ashmole. They had orders to watch for a certain signal which Tolley himself would send up to call them together at a safe distance from town, where they were to be joined by their leaders and their guide.

The signal was made. Major Magnet took horse at Durango and cut across country to join his men, hoping thus to throw all spies off the right scent, until too late for them to warn the Muck-a-mucks.

So far everything had prospered finely. The men were all eager for the fray, in a cool, even, steady fashion, so much more to be depended upon than louder display. Tinker had guided them admirably, without meeting a living soul who could take alarm at their movements.

They were now, as he declared, within less than four miles of the outlaw retreat. They could catch a sound sleep, and then have abundance of time in which to gain the den. This would give them all the advantage of a surprise in the gray dawn, just when the outlaws would be most thoroughly off their guard.

Then, too, it would be more easy to throw a guard around Rose Bryer before the baffled Muck-a-mucks could do her harm or attempt to carry her away into deeper recesses.

Major Magnet placed men on guard, then lay down with his feet to the fire, to wait for the hour in which they were to resume their march.

He had no intention of falling asleep. Indeed, until after he lay down he did not feel the slightest inclination to slumber, though he had lost much rest of late.

An hour passed by, and Tinker cautiously crested his head, snake-like, glaring swiftly about him over those prostrate figures. Not one moved. All seemed soundly sleeping.

Sinking his head once more, he slowly, noiselessly slid over the ground until fairly out of the circle of light cast around by the expiring flames. Under cover he crept along, visiting the posts assigned the guards. First one, then another and another, he found them asleep—so soundly slumbering that he kicked one guard brutally in the ribs without drawing more than a husky grunt from his lips.

"Dogs—sons of dogs!" he muttered, in his mother's tongue, then stooping and stripping the unconscious man of his weapons.

One after another he served the guards thus, then stole back to the fire, holding himself in readiness to flee for life in case any of his betrayed employers should break the power of that stupefying drug and seek to avenge the terrible wrong he had done them.

But not a limb stirred, and even Major Magnet was stripped of his weapons without stirring hand or foot.

Carrying his weapons away and hiding them among the rocks, Tinker ran swiftly up the point of rocks, striking a match and lighting a bit of greasy rag which he swung swiftly about his head.

The signal was promptly answered, and almost as quickly as himself, Captain Junius and half a dozen picked men gained the camp, laughing aloud in grim triumph as they looked around and noted their helpless enemies.

"You've done your work nobly, my man!" cried the High Muck-a-muck as he clapped a hand on the half-breed's shoulder, filling his hand with gold. "My men can do the rest."

"Me go 'long you," grunted the traitor, with a significant motion toward his throat as he added: "Heap bad medicine, dat!"

"All right, my covey!" cried Captain Junius in high glee as he freshened up the fire, the better to watch his men at work. "I'll find plenty of work for you, if you always play as neat a hand as this!"

"No good—dem," sniffed the half-breed, with a nod toward his victims. "Easy fool, like sheep!"

Two of the Muck-a-mucks bore a wooden bucket between them, and improvising brooms out of twisted twigs, then dipped them into the bucket, bringing forth enough of the sluggish tar to liberally daub the uncovered heads of each unconscious man in turn, laughing, jesting, enjoying the brutal jest even more than they might a more bloody revenge for threatened injury.

Only Major Magnet was exempt from this treatment. Captain Junius had a far more severe punishment in store for him, should the worst come to the worst.

The High Muck-a-muck himself superintended the binding of this important prisoner, knowing that odds alone would not be sufficient to hold the Man of Nerve in check when his senses should return and he fairly realize how shamefully he had been betrayed into the hands of the men whom he had openly vowed to bring to justice.

This attended to, Captain Junius tore a leaf from his note-book and wrote upon it in bold characters:

"Richard Tolley, you came out to shear, now go home and be shorn!"

To this curt message he signed his name and rank, pinning the paper to the marshal's bosom,

where it could not escape his notice on waking from that drugged slumber.

Under his supervision Major Magnet was bound upon a led horse, securely, yet as comfortably as his limp condition would permit, then the outlaws rode away through the night, taking a far different course from the one described by Tinker, to the rescuing party.

Even in that the half-breed had deceived them all.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HIGH MUCK-A-MUCK.

CAPTAIN JUNIUS was seated in his private quarters, elbows leaning on the rude table, his chin supported by his palms as they formed a semi-circle about the lower half of his mask.

On the opposite side of the table Major Magnet was sitting, his hands bound behind his back, though his feet were left free for the time being.

The Man of Nerve must have felt his ignominious capture very keenly, after all he had sworn to perform, but there was no sign of weakness or fear to be seen in his strong face now. His steel-blue eyes never moved from the veiled eyes opposite.

"You are the person called Major Magnet, sometimes with the addition of the Man of Nerve?" asked the High Muck-a-muck, after a period of silence which the captive would not and the captor hardly knew how to break.

"Did Tinker's Dam omit to point out all the fine points of the bargain he was offering you?"

"He did not forget to commend you to my best attention. He actually made his tongue tired singing your praises as a liberal master, a lavish cashier, and one who seldom asked the price of what he fancied. He almost wept as he admitted that you had one failing: You considered your pledged word as nothing, provided you could hire another to help you play traitor!"

"Tinker's Dam was born a liar, and I'm glad to see that he has at last met with a congenial employer," coldly retorted the prisoner.

Captain Junius slipped a paper from his bosom and flattened it out on the table before his captive, a gloved finger pointing to the bold, clear writing crossing the page.

"You charge the half-breed with being a liar; what should I call you, after having received this pledge? It was written by you. It was brought to me by Sam Patch, the man you swore to let go free of espionage or trail'g, the man on whose track you set Tinker's Dam. Do you dare deny this?"

"If I blush to make the admission, it is because I was such an infernal fool as to place trust in one of mixed blood."

"You admit it, then?"

"Why not? I kept Tinker on the track of your envoy. I bade him run the game home, then come to me for his pay. I still hope to reward the son of two races—reward him so richly that he'll never need betray another employer in this world!"

"And your written pledge—this?" persisted Captain Junius, tapping the paper impatiently.

"Will you kindly tell me what name is signed to the pledge?"

"That of Keene Bryer, but my man swore you wrote it all."

"As Keene Bryer's amanuensis; nothing more. I bound myself to nothing of the sort, for I had openly declared my intention of hunting down and breaking up the gang of Muck-a-mucks. If Samuel was fooled, and if you followed suit, don't blame me for it."

"And if Tinker had acted all through in good faith, what would you have done with us?" slowly asked the High-a-muck.

"Killed all who resisted, but simply taken the more sensible ones captive. As to their ultimate fate, the law must answer. As to their chief—"

"Well?" asked Captain Junius, as the major paused without completing that sentence.

"What fate had you in store for me?"

"That was to depend on the manner in which you had treated Miss Bryer during her captivity. Unless she could honestly give you a white record, I swore to string you to the nearest tree with my own hands!"

For some little time there was silence between the two men thus confronted.

Of the twain, Major Magnet seemed the coolest, the one most fully master of himself, despite the thongs which held his hands helpless.

The High Muck-a-muck shifted his position uneasily. At times he would flash a glance toward his prisoner, only to avert his gaze as he encountered those keen, cool eyes which seemed trying to read all that lay hidden behind that rudely-painted mask.

Outwardly cold and composed, the brain of Major Magnet was busy enough, and there were fancies at work which set his blood to flowing more rapidly.

Was this the day for which he had watched and waited, for which he had longed and prayed through all these weary years? Was this the meeting for which alone he had clung to life? Was this his one enemy?

"You take long chances, Major Magnet," at

length spoke the chief of the Muck-a-mucks. "What a pity they don't pan out better!"

"It's a long rope that has no noose at the end of it!"

"From your past record, I was prepared to expect something of the sort, when I found you pitted against me," ignoring that transformed quotation without even a smile or a frown. "I knew you were a true-bred fighting cock. I knew that you would rather win by battle than gain by parley. Yet—even I could not believe you would endanger a young lady, the child of the man that you openly call your friend!"

"Nor have I," was the calm response. "The price you demand in exchange for Miss Bryer is ready and waiting for your claiming. Keene Bryer at once accepted your outrageous demands, and the exchange can't be made any too soon for him."

"Yet you lead an armed gang—"

"On my own hook, without even telling Mr. Bryer that I had any such move in contemplation, if you please," curtly interrupted Major Magnet. "I'm perfectly willing to answer for my own sins, if you look at it in that light. Don't try to find another scapegoat. And if there is a spark of manhood left in your composition, don't wreak your spite on the head of a lady."

Again silence fell over the two men, and once more Major Magnet fell to wondering if this grim mask really concealed the face of the being whom he had sworn to find and punish before he died.

If so, what a grim mockery was it all!

For years he had roamed far and wide, following to the end the frailest clues, chasing will-o'-the-wisps almost to the world's end, running down airy phantoms. Then, just as he was least suspicious, just as he least thought of it, comes this growing belief that for nearly two years past his longed-for prize had been almost within arm's length of him, unknown, unsuspected, unharmed!

The High Muck-a-muck suddenly broke into a laugh, then said:

"Isn't it a bit curious, when you come to look it all in the face, Major Magnet? You pick out two cards on which you trust your fortune. There are other two against you. Yours are dead sure winners, if you only play them the right way. Instead—"

"If you had set Tinker to freeing Creed Ashmole, he would have done your bidding just as surely, and if Ashmole had drilled his brain in the end, still you would have been the winner. And Hank Burlap would never have sold out your secret as Tinker did, after trailing my man home. Hard luck all 'round, major!"

"Ashmole came to you, then? I reasoned it out that way. Why isn't he here to help you mock a man whose hands are tied? That would suit him clear down to the ground!"

There was a brief hesitation, then Captain Junius said:

"Because he is bound even more securely than you are, major."

For the first time since that interview began, the Man of Nerve showed signs of strong emotion. His eyes blazed, his teeth showed under his mustache, his face grew paler as he spoke slowly:

"Swear to that, captain, and I'll more than half forgive you for what you've been guilty of!"

"Oa the Bible, if you will," laughed the outlaw. "Half forgive, you say? Make it whole forgiveness, and I'll send Ashmole to the scaffold for murdering Hank Burlap!"

"Surely he wasn't fool enough to tell you so much of his own accord?" asked the major, incredulity in his face as in his speech.

"I wrung it from him, for reasons of my own. But that wasn't why I clapped him in limbo. Burlap took his life in his hand when he entered on such a perilous game. I would have killed him myself, if he had carried the game clear to this spot. What I blamed Ashmole for most was his asinine folly in leaving such a red trail behind him, when he might just as well have waited until he had his game fairly treed in here."

"I don't mind admitting that I was glad of an excuse to break the fellow. I never would have taken him into the big game if I could have known what a miserable botch he was going to make of it. But he promised so well, he talked so plausibly! His opportunities were so admirable!"

"You know the game we were playing, so I'm not mealy-mouthed about making full confession, particularly as you are hardly in a fix to do me any harm."

"Ashmole first proposed the scheme. He mixed business matters up so that the old gentleman couldn't leave to visit his daughter, and he hinted around until Keene Bryer began to think it would be a mighty fine thing to have his daughter come out to keep house for him. Then, by a little more shrewd dealing, Ashmole received a commission to act as her escort to Animas City."

"You know what followed, but you can't see just how far our hopes soared. I was to hold the young lady for ransom. Ashmole was to forge papers and smooth the way for gaining

full possession of the Golden Hope when its rightful owner passed off the stage. Then he was to wed Miss Bryer, and we were to divide up the estate between us."

"Truly a precious scheme!" muttered Major Magnet.

"Was it not?" with a short, hard laugh. "But Ashmole made a complete botch of it from the very first. You helped him, major, and you see what it has all come to."

"You have fifty thousand waiting for your acceptance, and if you are anything more than an idiot, captain, you'll freeze to that as quick as you can close fingers on it."

"And have another cunning trap close about my neck?"

"I give you my word that no other trap is set, although, as a matter of course, Dick Tolley will be ready enough to run you in if you give him a chance. Outside of that danger, you have nothing to fear. As long as you keep your grip on me!"

"Aren't you just a little too magnanimous, major?"

"I'm thinking of Miss Bryer, just now," was the earnest response. "After she is safe you'll get nothing but uncompromising enmity from me—hands or lips."

"You are frank. I'm strongly tempted to be the same," slowly uttered the High Muck-a-muck. "You were not always called Major Magnet?"

"Not as an infant, of course."

"Nor even when you attained your majority. I might come still closer to the mark, and name even the year in which you dropped your real name. That is, of course, if you are the person I begin to believe, and the one concerned when a friend of mine once had no little to say."

"That friend of yours had a name, of course?"

"And so did the man of whom he talked so often. I wonder if you ever bore a name like it, major?"

"Not knowing, can't say. It is hard to pronounce?"

"No harder than Ralph Locksley!"

Although he more than anticipated what was coming, and though he braced his nerves to bear up without self-betrayal, Major Magnet could not wholly control his face as that name was pronounced. It grew white as that of one ready for the grave. And as he saw this, the High Muck-a-muck broke into a harsh laugh.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE STORY OF A BROKEN HEART.

"You make a good fight, major, but fortune is playing against you. Your name is Ralph Locksley!"

"And your name is—Captain Junius, of course," with a low, hard laugh that pointed the break.

"What my real name is you will never know," was the grave response. When I have restored Miss Bryer to her father and have secured the reward he offers for her safe return, Captain Junius will remain only a memory. Under another name I will hide where even hatred cannot uncover me."

"Not if you take the name of Leo Crandall!" flashed the major.

"That name is already appropriated—by a tombstone," was the cool reply, and as he spoke the High Muck-a-muck unflinchingly met that keen, almost scorching gaze. "The one who bore it in life was a friend as dear to my heart as he was hated by yours, Ralph Locksley."

"Dead—you swear that he is dead and beyond my vengeance?"

That iron mask was dropped, now, and the Man of Nerve permitted his full passion to find expression, not only in his hoarse voice but in his white face, his blazing eyes.

"I know how that thought cuts you," said Captain Junius, his own tones a little unsteady, though he quickly mastered that emotion. "I know how long and how fiercely you have hated Leo Crandall. And I know, too, that he did not sin nearly so blackly as you have believed through all these years."

"Was it a sin at all, think?" laughed the prisoner, his mirth a dreadful thing to witness. "Only a ruined home—a ruined soul! Only a betrayed husband—only a blackened life!"

"I'm not defending all that Leo Crandall did, major," gravely added the outlaw chief. "I am not saying that he did not sin. I only say that he was less guilty than you have believed through all these years; only saying that, with his faults, he still possessed some virtues which ought to plead for him, now that the grave covers him."

"One would almost think you were pleading for more than a friend, captain," said Major Magnet, leaning back in his seat, once more his old self, so far as outward seeming went. "You are sure Leo Crandall is dead and buried?"

"I helped place him in the grave."

"Then of course he is dead. You are too kind-hearted to bury a living man, even with your tongue!" laughed the Man of Nerve.

And never did he more richly merit that title than now. Only one of rare mettle and marvelous nerve could laugh with a heart so full of terrible emotions as was his at that moment.

"Leo Crandall was my friend. He was wicked, no doubt, but I was no saint, and we got along well together. Then, when the hand of death hung over him, he told me the story of Ralph Locksley and his fair young wife, making me take a solemn vow to tell the man whom he so bitterly wronged, all that he told to me that dark night, should I ever chance to meet with Locksley."

"If you are indeed Ralph Locksley—"

"I was Ralph Locksley. I am Ralph Locksley's avenger."

"Then it is hardly necessary for me to go into full details, save enough to prove beyond a doubt that my story came direct from the lips of Leo Crandall himself. Will you listen?"

"Am I not your prisoner?" coldly said Major Magnet.

"Just at present, yes. How long you remain one, depends mainly on yourself, after I have performed the sacred duty left me as a legacy by my old friend."

"Do your duty, if such you consider it, Captain Junius."

"Ralph Locksley lived in a town of Upper California, near the Oregon line. Leo Crandall was a citizen of the same place. The first was married, but the other was single."

"He told me why that was: Because the only woman he had or ever could love, married Locksley. He could not accuse Locksley of anything worse than good luck in this. Neither husband nor wife knew before their marriage that Crandall was in love with her."

"Locksley was engaged in business that frequently called him from home, sometimes for long weeks at a stretch. Crandall had enough to live on without work, and so he had all the more leisure for brooding over his blasted hopes, all the more time in which to envy Locksley and finally to plan his ruin."

"And this was the man you call friend! Truly, you were well matched!" sneered the Man of Nerve.

"I never said Leo was perfect. I do not deny his guilt. I simply repeat that he was not entirely bad, and that before he died he fully repented what wrongs he had committed," gravely spoke the chief.

"Having naught to occupy his mind by exercising his muscles, Leo Crandall went from envying to coveting, and then, taking advantage of the frequent absence of the husband, he fell to undermining him in the mind of the wife."

"You said you need not enter into details—why waste time in that direction when the end is so clear?" coldly interposed the prisoner, only by the drops of cold sweat that beaded his brows betraying how intensely he must be suffering at having the black past raked up.

"Because I must, to make all clear, even to Ralph Locksley," was the cold response. "For even he never knew the whole truth. He was deceived—yes! But not in the fashion he has all these years believed."

"Guard your tongue, Captain Junius," harshly interrupted the prisoner, once more giving way for a single breath, though he as quickly recovered himself.

"I have sworn to utter the simple truth, and if it hurts you worse than the lies you have believed, I can't help that. I have set myself a mark, and I'm going to aim right at the bull's-eye."

Major Magnet fell back to his former position, his face set hard as steel, only his glowing eyes telling aught of his emotions.

"I said that Leo Crandall tried to undermine Ralph Locksley in the estimation of his wife, but he failed. He saw that his efforts were in vain, and changed his plans before Mrs. Locksley suspected his real purpose."

"He called on her one day during her husband's absence, with a cunningly-forged telegram, saying that Locksley was lying at the point of death, in San Francisco, begging that his wife might come at once, bringing her child with her."

"The poor woman was dazed by the stroke, and the rest was easy for one who had so carefully laid his plans to cover every emergency as had Leo Crandall. He hurried her away, leaving behind him the forged note which you found on your return, Ralph Locksley."

"A clumsy lie. She eloped with a handsomer man," coldly uttered the prisoner, outwardly unmoved by that statement.

"It was a lie, but you believed it, just as Crandall calculated you would. And in that belief, he laughed as he felt that his game was fairly won at last!"

"It was not until far away from that empty home that Crandall came to a halt, deeming it high time for him to begin tasting the fruit of his long scheming. It all seemed so easy!"

"His prize was already broken in spirit by that shock. She was weak and ailing. When she came to know the whole truth—spiced with the cunning lies which Crandall had taken care to provide himself in abundance—she would accept the inevitable, and in the end be all the happier for the deception he had built up around her."

"Little by little Crandall showed his hand, first exhibiting cunning proofs that she had been deceived by Locksley from the very first."

He proved to her that she was no lawful wife—that Locksley was already a husband and a father when he bore her to the altar. He showed forged proofs that he still maintained his first wife, and that during long absences, which he claimed were solely on account of business interests, he lived with that wife and children, in San Francisco.

"More than this, even—for I am sworn to reveal the whole truth no matter what betides—Crandall gave her a letter purporting to be written by Locksley, bidding her adieu forever. And near the end, he bade her take pity on Leo Crandall and marry him, for her child's sake."

"It was hard to make her believe this, despite all his proofs. He failed, even to the bitter end! For when he cast aside all pretense, telling her how he loved her, how he longed to cover up her shame by giving her an honest man's name for life, she spurned him as though he might have been a mangy cur!"

"Then—well, Crandall told me that her heart broke!"

The last words came huskily and unsteady. Captain Junius broke off his hard recital, as though unwilling to trust his tongue further.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BEYOND ALL PARDON.

"Not all at once. Not until days and weeks dragged by. But Myra Locksley never recovered from that blow, and though she lived on, as I tell you, her heart was broken then and there!"

Captain Junius uttered these words in a low, forced tone, much as a man might accuse himself of some bitter, black crime, by a power against which he could not struggle.

Major Magnet listened, but only his glowing eyes told that he was not deaf as well as dumb for the time being.

"You still doubt the perfect truth of what I am telling you, Ralph Locksley?" and there was something of angry impatience in his manner as he spoke on, rapidly, more clearly than through the last few sentences.

"That is because you at once jumped to the conclusion that your life had been a living lie ever since she wedded you. You covered her name with curses. You made a bonfire of all she had left behind, then set out to kill both wife and lover—save the mark!"

"And yet—Crandall *did* love Myra Locksley! If not, would he have acted as I am now bound to tell you?"

"Mrs. Locksley lived for some time after receiving that fatal blow, but she was too weak to even flee from the hotel to which Crandall had taken her. And lie—well, he did what he could to win her back to life, outside of branding himself the vile liar he really was."

"He could not do that—just then. He loved her so madly! And until the end was very near, he felt that she would rally from the shock, and in the end learn to kiss the hand that smote her."

"When he realized that she was dying his will broke, and he told her all, clearing the memory of her husband in her sight, laying bare his own black treachery. And dying, Myra Locksley forgave him his sins against her."

Captain Junius paused, partly to steady his voice, partly to hear what his prisoner might say. But Major Magnet gave no sign. Not a muscle moved, and but for his eyes he might have been taken for some cunningly carved automaton.

"During those days when Mrs. Locksley hovered between life and death, Leo Crandall cared for the child, little Myrtle. She had always shown a liking for him, and now he began to love her with something of the passion which he had felt for her mother. And this love deepened as the end came."

"The child was in his arms when Myra Locksley spoke her last message before death—a message to her husband, in whom her perfect faith had been revived."

"And after that message was given, bidding Crandall say how true she had been in thought, word and action to the vows she had taken upon herself at the altar, Myra Locksley made her enemy once, her friend now, care for little Myrtle until he could restore her to the arms of her widowed parent."

"Leo Crandall gave that pledge, and at the time he meant to lose no time in carrying out her dying wishes; but when he recovered sufficiently from the terrible shock that death gave him, Ralph Locksley was not to be found. And then, as time rolled on, the child grew more and more precious to him. And then he thought, not of how he could find Ralph Locksley, but how he could the more surely avoid being found by him. Until—this day!"

With that word, Captain Junius removed both outer and inner masks, laying bare a strong, handsome face.

The face of the man for whom Major Magnet had been searching the wide world over for so many long years!

One mighty effort the prisoner made to burst the bonds that held his arms powerless, but they were chosen too carefully for that. Only the one effort. Then, knowing his impotency for that moment, Major Magnet sat still,

silent, only his eyes showing how intensely he longed to have that throat within his grasp.

The High Muck-a-muck was pale as his prisoner, and showed far more agitation outwardly.

"It was not all a lie that I told you first-off, Locksley. The name of Leo Crandall does mark a tombstone, and beneath it I buried the name and the man, so far as I could, never thinking the time would come when of my own accord I'd reclaim that name.

"It was when I had been hard pressed by you, and when I fully realized that until you believed death had cheated you out of your vengeance I would never be safe from your blows. I placed the grave where I thought you would be sure to find it, near the home to which you had taken your fair bride."

"I did find it. And I dug to the bottom, meaning to have vengeance on the foul remains since better was denied me. I found—only a fraud and a lie; what else, with that cursed name above them?"

Coldly, steadily, yet with an undying hatred the Man of Nerve uttered these words, and as he listened Captain Junius felt that his hopes of reconciliation were worse than vain. Yet he had set himself a task, and would not turn aside before reaching the end.

"You ask nothing about your child, Ralph Locksley."

A brief shiver ran through the frame of the prisoner, and something like exultation leaped into the eyes of the outlaw as he noted this touch of weakness.

"It has been years since I took that oath by the deathbed of your wife, Locksley, but I can still keep it if you will have it that way. In all those years I have never once lost sight of the little child left in my care. I can bring full proof of what I tell you now—if you see fit to pay my price!"

Major Magnet broke into a laugh; harsh, dry seeming to come from a parched throat, its notes were so unnatural.

"I have been waiting for something of that sort, you miserable cur! I have heard something of the one you call your daughter. Is it this spawn of a thief, liar, forger, assassin, that you want to palm off on me as the price of a life?"

The face of the High Muck-a-muck flushed redly and his eyes took on a tigerish glitter as he listened to these bitter epithets. But with marvelous will-power he choked back his rage, to pursue his end.

"You are fouling your own nest, Ralph Locksley, in saying this against the one you have heard of as my daughter, Little Firefly. She is the child I received from the dying hands of your wife. She is your own child, Myrtle Locksley."

"I have raised her pure and true. I have kept her close beside me, living a wild life at times, but as Heaven hears me now, I swear to you that a better, purer, more innocent maiden does not tread the footstool this day than my darling—your darling, if you can bend that stiff neck of yours."

"For you to put a dirty foot upon it, branding me slave?"

"I don't ask so much, Locksley," with all rage disappearing from face and voice as by magic. "All I ask is your hand in forgiveness for the bitter wrong I did you and yours in the past."

"I never thought of meeting you after this fashion. I never thought to use such words toward you. But—last night Myra came to me as I lay sleeping, her eyes wet with tears, her face so sad, so—"

He broke off, averting his face as though ashamed of more fully betraying his unusual weakness.

"I will forgive you—on certain conditions," slowly said the Man of Nerve, after a brief silence.

"Name them!" flashed Captain Junius, turning his face once more.

"When you turn time back until it reaches the date that blackened my life forever! When you restore my wife to life, and leave all as you found it! When you renew my faith in human nature, lift the burden of years and suffering such as few men have been called on to endure; when you place my child in the arms of her happy mother, and show them to me as I last saw them—then I will forgive you, but never before!"

"Not if I bring your long-lost child to you?"

"I would not recognize her. Has she not called you 'father' through all these years?" with a hard, bitter laugh.

"You mean this, Locksley?" slowly asked the High Muck-a-muck. "If I were to give you your child and your liberty?"

"My first use of it would be to take you by the throat in a grip that has been gaining strength and deadliness through all these years!" came the swift reply.

Captain Junius rose to his feet and blew a shrill whistle in token that he needed the presence of a chosen guard. And with all softness, all remorse, all repentance gone, he said:

"I was a fool, but the weakness is gone for all time. I'll milk you dry, then kill you with my own hands!"

His guards came and he signed them to remove the prisoner.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LITTLE FIREFLY'S PLEDGE.

LYING bound and helpless even to move a limb, Major Magnet forced himself to review all that the High Muck-a-muck had revealed that afternoon.

He had been taken back to a damp den among the rocks, too small to be called a cave, something similar to the hole into which Creed Ashmole had been cast after kissing the lead of Little Firefly for his insults to Rose Bryer.

Even by day scant light found its way into that den, but now that night had fallen, the darkness was almost palpable.

Although the task was painful beyond computation, Major Magnet forced himself to review the case, item by item, trying to sum all up as a just judge who had no personal interest in the case.

Through all these weary years he had believed his wife a willing sinner, and great as had been his love for her before that terrible blow fell to crush his faith, he found it difficult to alter that belief now. And yet—

There had been truth in that demon's eyes, voice, face, while telling of the death-bed.

He was still debating his doubts, slowly being convinced that his wife had been far more sinned against than sinning, when a faint noise arrested his chain of thoughts.

The sound came from the entrance to his place of imprisonment, and at first he fancied it but a careless movement on the part of a guard whom Captain Junius might have placed before the den as double security.

"Sir—Major Magnet!" came a low, musical voice from out of the intense darkness.

A cold sweat broke out on his face at the sound, for it seemed an echo of his dead wife's voice. In that echo he did not notice the words that were uttered.

"I pray do not call out, sir," came the further caution, and he could hear something creeping closer to where he lay so helpless. "If I am suspected—if fath—if he knew of my coming, it might be fatal for us both!"

"You are—"

"Little Firefly. Am I anything else? Can you tell me? Can you say whether that evil man was telling the truth when he declared that I was not born his daughter?"

A trembling hand touched his face in the darkness, and though it was swiftly withdrawn, he felt the form of his unseen visitor coming closer, until their garments touched.

A thrill of hope shot through his being. Surely this was a chance which, properly nursed, might lead to his escape? And to something far dearer to him than mere liberty—vengeance on Leo Crandall!

"You are Little Firefly? You are the one Captain Junius has reared as his daughter?" he slowly asked, seeking time in which to steady his nerves and pick his words. "Has he sent you here to plead his case? What do you know about it?"

"No one sent me, unless it was a whisper from the spirit fath—that man spoke of to you, sir," unsteadily replied Little Firefly.

"You were listening? You heard all he said, then?"

"I was listening. I am glad I did, but—Tell me!" she passionately broke off, her trembling hands moving through the dark until they rested above his rapidly beating heart. "Tell me the truth, as you hope for rest and peace of your own! Am I what he said? Am I your—am I another man's child?"

That spirit of whom she spoke seemed present to the man, as well. And if he had doubted before, Major Magnet did so no longer. This was the girl baby whom he had kissed on parting from her mother, an age ago. This was his child—and yet—he would not openly admit as much, at least until he had tested her further.

"You heard all, you say? Then you must have heard him tell how your mother died?"

"Was she my mother?" persisted Little Firefly, without answering his questions. "Was he telling the truth, or was he lying for gain or some evil purpose?"

"If I were to say that I believe he was speaking the simple truth so far; that you are the child of the woman whom he murdered as surely as though his own hand had torn the broken heart from her bosom—what would be your answer, Little Firefly?"

"Vengeance!"

Only the one word, but more meaning could not have been crowded into ten-fold the space.

Now the father recognized his child! That one touch of common nature convinced him beyond all doubt.

But even yet he denied himself, and impassionately asked:

"How would you set about it, Little Firefly? You are but a girl, weak and by yourself. Captain Junius is strong, cruel, well backed by his evil gang. What could you do?"

"I could kill him," was the slow, grave response. "But if I had one arm to help me, I could do even more."

"And that arm? Do you mean mine, Little Firefly?"

"I mean the arm of my rightful father, but he is ashamed to recognize his child. So be it!"

with a sudden change of tone, her voice full of strong resolve. "I can act for myself. I can do in one night what the husband of my mother has taken years—and then failed!"

"Little Firefly—Myrtle!" softly breathed the Man of Nerve.

"Father—now I know you!" sobbed the girl, bending forward and pillowing her head on his bosom, arms about his neck.

"And I you, my wronged Myra's babe!"

For some little time there was silence between them, broken at last by Little Firefly, as she drew a knife and felt for his bonds:

"Forgive me—I never thought, until I missed your embrace!"

"Wait, little one," quietly interposed the prisoner. "Have you formed any distinct plan of your own?"

"Nothing beyond setting you free and pointing out to you where the murderer of my mother lies sleeping!" was the swift reply.

"I might kill him, it is true, but would that wipe out the bitter black past? To send him without a pang to his master? For we are but two, and his band is numerous."

"Yet—you will punish him?"

"I will punish him, never fear. But why are you so bitter against him, little one? Has he treated you so harshly?"

"No. He has treated me well, and though I could never really love him—such love as a child should give its father—for he is hard and merciless with so many crimes upon his soul—I have always found a curious repulsion, but I never fully understood why that should be until now. I learned the reason while listening to him tempting you to bury the past."

"How many men has he with him?" asked Major Magnet, thoughtfully.

"A score or more, every one of whom has or ought to have a price upon their heads. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking. And Miss Bryer? She is still in his power?"

"Yes, though she sent off a messenger to Animas City to-night, bearing his final terms to Mr. Bryer."

"I told you I was thinking, little girl," slowly added the Man of Nerve. "Do you know I have sworn to break up this entire gang?"

"I heard so. And I have been thinking, father," with a sudden laugh, low but full of music. "It sounds impossible, but I really believe I can promise to put Captain Junius and his entire family into your hands, to deal with as your judgment says best!"

"How? Do that, and I'll give you—"

"A father's love—I ask no more on earth!" was the passionate cry of a hungry heart, her lips touching his, her tears dropping hot upon his face in the darkness.

"That is yours already, even before I caught one glimpse of your face, my child," murmured the father in reply. "Your sweet voice is enough. Be sure that love will never be lacking from your father."

Little Firefly regained her self-control after a bit and rapidly outlined the bold plot she had devised. That was to drug the Muck-a-mucks, much as Tinker's Dam had drugged Major Magnet and his men, then set him free to help her bind their prisoners.

"If the plan fails, there is still another to use," she added, when he had accepted her scheme. "I will free you, and with Rose, we can slip out of the valley without being caught. And once you have placed Rose in her father's arms, you and I will take the trail again to revenge our dead!"

Then Little Firefly stole away, to wait for another night.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THANKS TO LITTLE FIREFLY.

LITTLE FIREFLY set about her self-appointed task with even more than her customary degree of enthusiasm.

It must be kept in mind that her life and training had been a far from ordinary one, despite the protestations of Captain Junius while trying to bribe the enemy. True, he had guarded her jealousy, and kept her pure in mind and morals, but he had not been able to conceal from her the nature of his life, nor prevent her from learning much of late days concerning his many breaches of the law.

And, as she told Major Magnet, there had always seemed to be a strange barrier lowered between herself and the man whom she had believed her own father, until she learned different from his own lips.

"Blow for blow, and get the first stroke in if you can!"

That was the motto of the Muck-a-mucks, and Little Firefly had grown up in their company.

What wonder, then, that he should be eager to avenge the terrible wrongs which her sainted mother had undergone at the hands of the monster who now swore to kill her real father?

Forgetting all the love Captain Junius had shown her, Little Firefly bent all her wits and energies to make good the pledge she had given Major Magnet, her new-found father.

It was night again before the Man of Nerve

heard her light footsteps at the entrance to his place of captivity, and he fairly held his breath in his anxiety to learn how the daring little Amazon had fared.

"You will forgive me if I have failed, daddy?" she murmured, pressing her soft cheek against his for an instant, before feeling for the bonds which he had persisted in wearing until the last moment, through fear of their plot being discovered if his limbs were found at liberty. "I can at least set you free. I can show you a way out of this valley, and we can be far away before pursuit is made. You will forgive me?"

For answer, Major Magnet clasped her in his arms, kissing her lovingly. For he did love her, very dearly, even though as yet he had not so much as rested his eyes upon her face or figure.

"I did the best I could, daddy," softly added Little Firefly, seemingly far from heart-broken by her failure, so long as those loving arms were about her. "I wanted so much to show you that I'm a chip of the old block, as the saying goes. But—"

"We can take Miss Bryer with us?" asked the major, calmly.

"She is waiting now."

"You weren't able to secure horses, though?"

"One for each, and the choicest of all the herd, daddy!"

"And Captain Junius is in camp?"

"Waiting for the return of his messenger to Animas City—yes!"

"You know the way there, little girl? You could guide Miss Bryer safely to town, in case of need?"

"I could, but you will be with us, daddy, of course?"

There was a brief silence, Major Magnet trying to decide whether or no he should trust this young girl with all his reasons for questioning her so closely. But, before he could decide, Little Firefly spoke:

"You are thinking how you can best get rid of two poor, hysterical girls for a little, daddy? So you can make an effort to capture the High Muck-a-muck?"

"Remember how he murdered your mother, Myrtle!" flashed Locksley.

"I remember. I honor you for thinking of vengeance; even more so because you don't stop to count the odds against you. But, come with me now, daddy, dear. Rose will be tired waiting for my return."

Little Firefly took his hand and led him out of the den, pausing when they cleared the rocks and gained the soft moonlight. She turned toward her father, laying bare her face as it turned upward to meet his surprised gaze.

"Does it strike you dumb, my ugliness, daddy, dear?" she laughed, but with tears briefly dimming her great dark eyes.

Major Magnet bent his head and closed her lips with a kiss.

"It is your mother's face, Myrtle; her eyes, her hair, her face just as I saw it in those first happy days when all was love and trust and perfect peace. It is the same face which so strangely attracted me toward Rose Bryer, for she and you might be twin sisters!"

"Shall we hasten to Rose?" softly asked Little Firefly, taking his consent for granted and with her warm fingers clasping his hand, she led the way swiftly, silently under cover until in front of a dimly outlined hut, at the sight of which Major Magnet gave a slight start.

"You have mistaken the place, Myrtle!" he muttered, warningly.

But, Little Firefly had dropped his hand, pausing at the rude door to catch up a masked lantern standing just within. She moved the mask and sent a broadening sheet of light across the hut to fall over the face and figure of—not Rose Bryer, but Leo Crandall!

"The first of the gifts I bring you, daddy!" laughed Little Firefly, her face flushing, her dark eyes filled with triumph and revenge.

With a pantherish leap the Man of Nerve was by the side of his long-sought enemy, ready to crush out the cry of alarm which he felt sure that blinding light must draw from his lips; but the precaution was unnecessary.

The High Muck-a-muck lay motionless, as death had already claimed its prey.

"Remember your promise, daddy!" laughed Little Firefly, shrinking back from those wondering eyes in mock fear. "You swore to forgive me for making such a botch of—not my work, but my little joke!"

"Then—he is drugged, not dead!"

"And I reckon you'll find that only three persons—for I don't count Creed Ashmole as a human being—are awake in the valley this night, daddy; you, Rose and—"

She left her own name unspoken, for Ralph Locksley had her tight clasped in his arms, and she loved his kisses far better than the sound of her own voice, woman though she was!

A few minutes later, leaving Captain Junius firmly bound in his quarters, the father and daughter passed out to inspect and secure the Muck-a-mucks before any of them could break that drugged spell.

Thanks to the care and precautions taken by Little Firefly, all was well, and using the strong

cords with which she provided him, Major Magnet bound each member of the band beyond the possibility of escape without aid, only ceasing in his labors when the little Amazon declared that the last member of the family was accounted for.

Together they went back to the hut in which Captain Junius lay, when Major Magnet sent Little Firefly to assure Rose Bryer that all had prospered, and her freedom was now beyond question.

"You will not—" hesitated Little Firefly, with a swift glance from captive back to captor.

"I am only going to restore him to his senses. His punishment has been delayed for many years. It can wait yet a little longer."

With a parting kiss Little Firefly left the hut to do his bidding, and Major Magnet set about breaking that drugged slumber.

By a liberal use of cold water he at length succeeded, though it was many minutes later before Captain Junius could fully realize the whole truth. And Major Magnet tasted the first fruits of vengeance as he heard the criminal curse and threaten—then beg!

"I promise you nothing, Leo Crandall. You have sinned, and you must suffer. But the form of punishment may be altered if you will. Prove to me that you told me the whole truth when you had me bound and helpless in here the other day, and I'll spare you the rope."

Such were the best terms the High Muck-a-muck could secure, and in the end he accepted them.

He swore that Little Firefly was indeed Myrtle Locksley, daughter of Ralph and Myra, his wife. He told where the broken-hearted victim of treacherous love was buried, and as a man who felt himself on the brink of eternity, he repeated his oath that she had never sinned, never been false to her vows in act or thought, dying with the knowledge that her husband had never betrayed her, her latest breath being a prayer for his well-doing through life.

All this Little Firefly and Rose Bryer heard, standing one on each side of the Man of Nerve. And when Captain Junius ceased speaking, the avenger led them both away to the hut assigned to Rose, then drew his daughter aside, telling her he wished her to guide Rose to Animas City by the safest route, leaving him to come after with his captives.

"You have more in view than that, daddy!" she cried, her eyes aglow. "You mean to—what?"

"Avenge my murdered wife!"

"Was she not my mother, also?"

Major Magnet bowed his head, and Little Firefly quickly added:

"Then I have a right to see her wrongs avenged father! Only for me you would never have had a chance to keep your oath of vengeance!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE WAGES OF SIN.

"WHERE are you taking me to?"

"To your stool of penitence, Leo Crandall."

"You mean to murder me, then!"

There was no reply made to this fierce ejaculation, and once more the triad moved on through the growing dawn, leaving the little valley behind them, heading for a narrow ledge rock high up the hills.

Little Firefly led the way, light and active, sure-footed as a mountain goat. Captain Junius followed her, foot-free but with his arms confined at the wrists. Close upon his heels trod Major Magnet, now and then aiding the hampered captive to surmount a difficult place.

The point of rocks was gained, and the little party came to a halt just as the first rays of the rising sun came over the eastern peaks.

"I once swore an oath to bring you to the gallows, as Captain Junius, but I will spare you that shameful death. I once vowed to torture you as never sinner was tormented before, Leo Crandall; but I have given over that plan now, thanks to your free confession, and to your having told my poor wife the whole truth before she died. And because you have restored to me my daughter—Myra's child—I will give you a chance for your life."

The condemned man made no reply. He was listening intently. He was watching closely, ready to snatch at the faintest hope of saving his life.

"And I, Captain Junius," broke in Little Firefly, her tones cold and hard, her face white almost as his own, but without a trace of love or pity in her beautiful countenance as she met his mutely pleading look. "I have won the right to pronounce your death-warrant!"

Major Magnet produced two revolvers, throwing them open to show that the cylinders were empty. He placed a single cartridge into each weapon, then dropped one at the feet of his enemy, holding the other in his hand as he spoke again:

"Little Firefly will cut your bonds when I have my position, and you can arm yourself the moment she bids you prepare. If you kill me, she has promised you shall go free. If I kill you—as I surely shall—I promise to give you decent burial, and let the people know that Captain Junius preferred death to capture. And, as for Leo Crandall, his name dies with him!"

This was far more than one so guilty as himself had any right to expect, but the thought gave Captain Junius scant pleasure or comfort. He felt a strange chill creep over him. And even before a shot was fired, he knew that he was a dead man!

Yet he had to face his fate, bravely as might be.

He stood with his back to the edge of the precipice, and Major Magnet, pistol in hand, cut off all chance of escape by a mad flight.

His bonds fell away under the keen edge of Little Firefly's knife, and she sprang nimbly back out of his reach, pistol in hand.

"Arm yourself, Captain Junius!" she cried, sharply. "I will give the word. If you attempt to fire before the word *one*, I'll kill you with my own hand!"

"I always loved you, Florence," he began, to be cut short with:

"My name is Myrtle Locksley, and I am the child of the woman whose heart you broke! Arm yourself, or die the death of a dog!"

"I'll die—like Captain Junius!"

As he uttered the title, Leo Crandall sprang backward, turning himself over in the air, to shoot head-first down, to meet instant death on the ragged rocks, two hundred feet below!

Before the sun had fully lighted up the little hill-locked valley in which the Muck-a-mucks had pitched their camp, preparations were under way for the trip to Animas City.

Horses were brought out, and men were bound upon them, each wearing the grim mask which had hidden his identity while on their numerous raids.

This was harder work than dangerous, for none of them had fully recovered from the drug which little Firefly had mixed with their coffee and food, but Major Magnet proved himself a man of tireless muscle, and before long the strange procession was ready.

The horses were secured in pairs, and a long, strong rope ran from head to head, down the line to the rear couple, making anything like a stampede altogether out of the question.

After this fashion Major Magnet took up his march for Animas City.

Rose Bryer and Little Firefly rode together, the one pale, and betraying the effects of her sore trials, but smiling and even breaking into a musical laugh as Little Firefly strove to cheer her up.

At the rear of the line, bound and helpless, the picture of utter misery and despair, rode Creed Ashmole, alone of all those captives, with his bullet-marked face exposed to view.

The journey was too long to be completed in one day, but Major Magnet and his able lieutenant, Little Firefly, proved equal to the occasion and nothing occurred to mar that triumphal march.

And when they came within sight of their destination—when Little Firefly rode on with Rose Bryer to announce the coming of the Man of Nerve, with his train of prisoners—when Richard Tolley and a hastily collected posse rode out to meet and guard the train from being broken by a mob of lynchmen—

What words can do justice to that occasion?

That same night a mob broke open the jail and took out Creed Ashmole and Tinker's Dam, stringing them up without mercy.

The rest of the prisoners were saved for trial, which resulted in exiling a few, and in giving the remainder employment in the service of the State.

When that was done, Major Magnet assumed his legal name, to be known thenceforth as Ralph Locksley. And, though he sometimes felt that his vow of vengeance had been but imperfectly kept, in course of time he buried all of the past that was disagreeable.

Love helped him to accomplish this, for, when Keene Bryer tried to thank him for saving not only his daughter but a fortune as well, the Man of Nerve simply answered:

"I was working more for myself than for you, partner. I loved your daughter from the very first—perhaps because she so strongly resembled my dead wife in face and figure. Now—I love her for her elf. If you feel in my debt, pay me by trying to make her believe I am plenty young enough to call you father-in-law!"

And Keene Bryer did try, only to be indignantly reproved by Rose.

"Why, papa, he's younger in heart than I am—and ever so much more worthy of being loved!"

After that, of course, the end came speedily. Rose married Ralph, and each firmly believes the other got by far the worst of the bargain, or rather the better!

Little Firefly lives with them still. She declares that she will never marry, because she can't find a man perfect enough to deserve such a treasure.

Nevertheless, three times a week there is a "dim, religious light" burning in Major Magnet's parlor, and that long after his wife and wife are locked in slumber.

So—there is still hope for "the perfect man!"

THE END.

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